The Four Noble Truths

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 18:46

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhasa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhasa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhasa.

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

What I'm hoping to do for the rest of the year is go through the whole teaching in little short talks, and the place to start of course is with his declaration of the Four Noble Truths. If you were to choose one word upon which all his teaching is based, it would have to be the word *dukkha*. This *dukkha* means hard to bear, and it's translated variously as suffering, dissatisfaction, discomfort, and so forth, but it really covers the whole of life.

It begins with dukkha-dukkha, which means the suffering of suffering or the dissatisfaction of dissatisfaction. In other words, ordinary physical pain, mental anguish, and so forth, are natural to the human condition. But what makes it suffering is the way we react. It's knowing that that allows us to find the escape out of suffering.

That's what we're doing when we're meditating, of course. When we're in posture, we note something coming up, a pain in the knee or something, and we note the reaction to it. When we can stand apart from the reaction, we find ourselves in a place which is not suffering, even though the environment—the pain in the knee and the not wanting of the pain in the knee—is not pleasant. It's making that distinction when it comes to the pains and woes of life.

Even taking something very heavy like a death, the death of somebody close to us. There's a tremendous amount of grief and heart suffering. But then there's the reaction to that, which is sometimes a desire not to face it, so it remains in the system as a turbulence. And sometimes the desire to indulge it. You get into this wrong relationship with grief where if you stop grieving, you think you've stopped loving. But when we feel it as a feeling in ourselves, we're standing apart from it, and that separation from the reaction that we've had is the nibbanic gap. That's what we have to keep rediscovering for ourselves. In these situations, the heart heals itself.

On the other side of that, of course, is everything to do with pleasure—the pleasures and joys of life. Here we have a different problem to do with indulgence. What indulgence simply means is that we're using something, we're becoming dependent on something in order to be happy. Everybody has their own definition of what makes them happy and everybody has their own particular feeling as to what happiness is. We tend to believe that that's the purpose of our lives, to feel happy.

When Sayadaw U Pandita turned up at IMS once, a woman said to him, "I'm so happy to see you." He replied in Burmese, but the translator didn't translate it. Afterwards, she went to the translator and asked, "What did he say?" He said, "I haven't come here to make you happy. I've come here to make you aware." That's the crucial point about the Buddha's teachings.

When we do indulge, there are always consequences—the grief of loss, the anxiety of loss, paying out loads for insurance. There's the anger of not getting what you want, the frustration of not getting what you want. And then, of course, the boredom—what used to make you happy and joyful, now you find boring. There's a whole load of mental dis-eases that comes through the process of attachment, through the process of indulgence. This is all contained in that little phrase, dukkha-dukkha. It's one type of suffering.

The second type is to do with impermanence. This is basically not coming to terms with the fact that everything arises and passes away. Not only does everything arise and pass away, nothing ever repeats. There's actually nothing in this universe, in our universe, in our lives, that we can rely upon. Anything can disappear at any moment. Coming to terms with that is really understanding this process of change.

We're especially fortunate in Britain because of our weather. The weather is constantly changing and therefore we can never make absolute plans as to when you want to go for a walk. I'm a fair weather walker and you make a plan to walk on such a day, and of course it rains or it rains and snows or it does everything else apart from sunshine. This whole idea of impermanence comes across when we actually look at what we arrange sometimes and sometimes we can't make it.

At a deeper level, this whole impermanence is taking us to the whole process of aging and final death. That's the difficult one to come to terms with, of course. But it's the quiet, gentle remembrance at all times that everything comes to an end, life comes to an end. You might think by reminding myself of that, I'm going to make myself depressed, but what happens is you find yourself living more in the moment. You come to appreciate the moment more and therefore, paradoxically, your life becomes much more joyful.

In medieval times, of course, it was very regular to have your memento mori, your reminder of death—a little skull on your desk or somewhere—so that you never actually forgot that life is short. That whole attitude of coming to terms with impermanence is part and parcel of our practice.

The final one is to do with the concept of self. The concept of self creates a substantiality, something that is real, whole, entire unto itself. But actually, when we look even a little bit deeper, we can see that everything is compounded. Everything is made up of little bits and pieces and these little bits and pieces are dependent on other little bits and pieces. This whole planet as we know is a living organism with little bits and pieces dependent on some other little bits and pieces. It's beginning to dissolve, beginning to deconstruct our experience of ourselves, which is part and parcel of that process.

We wouldn't do that or we'd be afraid to do that if when we actually deconstruct everything we find there's nothing there. That would be terrible. But what the Buddha is saying is that hidden within this

organism, there is something which doesn't die. It wasn't born, doesn't die. It's not even conditioned. Now, where is it? What could it possibly be? That's the process again of our meditation.

This sense of self is the fundamental delusion that lies at the basis of all our unhappinesses. It's the point where the awareness within us begins to experience this organism as itself. That's the big point of contact and it's right there that the whole trouble of delusion begins. The dependent origination begins with that phrase *avijjā*—delusion, not knowing. It's not a culpable thing. It's just the way it is.

How do we know when any of these delusions are arising? How do we know when we are under the spell of these misunderstandings? This is where the genius, you might say, or the real insight of the Buddha lies. It lies right there in our desires. If we're aware of a desire, we'll be able to pinpoint what is causing that desire. If it's wholesome, of course we empower it, but if it's not wholesome, then we have to sit with that energy until it dies away.

To be aware of a desire as it rises takes that bit of *appamāda*—his favourite word, one of his favourite words, which of course was his second to last word in life: *Appamādena!* Strive diligently for your liberation. It's that sense of constantly bringing ourselves back to the present moment and being awake to any little desire that comes up.

Most desires are neither here nor there. There's a desire in me to wave my hand about like I'm doing now. It's not something I'm going to be too bothered about. But if a desire is for something which I immediately perceive as unwholesome, unskillful, unvirtuous, then if I'm right there with the initial movement of that desire, the choice arises. Once I've activated it, that's it. I've lost that moment of choice. Once it's activated, then of course there are going to be results.

That second noble truth—the noble truth that desire is the cause of suffering—that's how the delusions manifest. Then of course he says that there is an end to this suffering. Finally, there's the path that he delineates, which is a bit too much for us to go into this evening. But most of you know it—it begins with right understanding, which is what we're doing now. That of course changes our attitudes. When our attitudes change, it affects the way we speak and what we do and our livelihood. It all reverts back to this: really understanding the way things are. Through that process of not activating those desires that are unwholesome and activating those desires that are wholesome, the attitude changes and very slowly we pull ourselves out of the morass of human suffering.

But let's go back to the third one, which is, of course, there is an end to suffering. The word he gives for that is *Nibbāna*. It's translated in various ways. Some of it is creative etymology, but the two main ones are no desire and unshackled, unfettered. Some of you will know the ten fetters that keep us at this level of existence. It's unfettering those that releases this awareness, which is the Buddha within.

I'd like to end my little homily with a quote from Mae Chee Kaew. Mae Chee Kaew was a Thai nun who died in 1991, so she's absolutely contemporary. She was a student of Ajahn Mahā Bua. Some of you might

know his writings. She worked with him and then once she became liberated, she went back to look after her nuns. That's what she did for the rest of her life. She died when she was about ninety-one, if I remember, of lung cancer.

This is what she says, which tells us how somebody who's fully liberated actually experiences life. Remember, she's fully engaged. She's there with the nuns and lay people who come, but mainly her concern seems to have been to guide her nuns. She's fully engaged in life. This is what she says, which tells us how that engagement manifests:

"Body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities." There's three parts to us: the body, our physicality, our mentality and this, what she here calls essence, that which is. "Absolutely everything is known," which means that whatever comes into the awareness, whatever arises on the screen of consciousness, she knows it. Her mind isn't somewhere else.

"Earth, water, fire and wind"—these, remember, are your four great elements—"the body, feeling, perceptions, conceptual thinking, and then there are the habits that we have, and finally consciousness. She knows when sounds, sights, smells, tastes, touches and emotions arise. She knows when"—now this is interesting—"when greed, anger and delusion arise. All are known. I know them as they exist in their natural states."

Now it might surprise you to think that somebody who's fully liberated still has negative unwholesome thoughts arise, but remember the mind is now habituated in a way of thinking. But the distinction between somebody who's an arahant and us is that they are traces in the mind that have no pull. They have no attraction and therefore they just arise and pass away. Whereas our habit of course is to jump and grab hold of them and off we go. What she's saying is that these are just traces that pass through the mind.

"Now no matter how much I'm exposed to them, I'm unable to detect even an instant when they have any power over my heart"—that's her next word for this Buddha within, her heart. Remember, it's not the emotional heart. This isn't emotion. This is her real being—"and they have no power over it. The awareness is there."

We experience that in our meditation on occasion. When we're observing things rising, passing away, we're in this state—we're having a little touch of *Nibbāna*. "All these things arise and cease. They're forever changing. But the presence"—that's the third word she uses to describe this awareness, this Buddha nature—"but the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of suffering."

I've never come across a more clear statement as to how an arahant experiences life. Not even the Buddha, which may be surprising. The Buddha has many statements about *Nibbāna* and about that state of mind, but I've never seen it expressed in a way that the ordinary meditator can grasp. There she is,

looking after her nuns, always in the moment, aware of what's actually happening. Whenever something slightly negative arises in the mind, it simply arises and passes away. It doesn't enter into her heart, into her awareness.

I'm hoping that you find that inspiring. I personally find it very inspiring. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your total devotion to the practice, you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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