

DHP 314-317 From the Chapter on Hell

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 26:31

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

I shall do my usual little bit of chanting here. These are from the Chapter on Hell.

Lajitāya na lajjanti, micchādiṭṭhi samannāgā, sattā gacchanti duggatim. Abhaye bhayasamino, bhaye cābhayasamino, micchādiṭṭhi samannāgā, sattā gacchanti duggatim. Avajje vajjamatino, vajje cāvajjasamino.

Now the translation. This is taken from Gil Fronsdal's book.

Ashamed of what's not shameful and not ashamed of what is, those who take up wrong views go to a bad rebirth.

Seeing danger in what's not danger and not seeing danger in what is, those with wrong views go to a bad, unfortunate rebirth.

I'll read the commentary that goes with that. A group of monks once saw some naked ascetics on their alms round. These would have been the Digambara Jain ascetics who don't wear clothes. You've probably seen them at the Kumbh Mela, the twelve-year celebration, and they cover their bodies with ash, which is antiseptic.

A group of monks once saw some naked ascetics on their alms round. They were naked, but they had their bowls covered with a piece of cloth. The monks remarked that perhaps they should put the cloth in the front part of their body. The naked ascetics retorted that they cover their bowls because they do not want insects or miniature life-forms to enter the bowl and be killed by them later.

When the monks returned to the monastery and told the story to the Buddha, the Buddha responded with this verse, saying that one who is ashamed of what is not shameful, but not shameful of a shameful thing, surely will go to a bad rebirth.

And on the next verse, just a little addition: we should be ashamed and afraid of things that are truly bad. Causing suffering to others is bad, and we should always be ashamed and afraid of doing so. On the other hand, being afraid and ashamed of something that is not bad at all will not help us in any way towards awakening. Thus we only accumulate demerit and suffer an unfortunate rebirth in the next life.

The next two verses I'll do together. I'll put the four together because they're all about going to hell, except the last verse where you get to heaven.

Finding fault in what's not a fault and seeing no fault in what is, those who take up wrong views go to an unfortunate rebirth, bad rebirth.

This little refrain: those who take up wrong views. But knowing fault as fault, and the faultless as the faultless, those who take up right views go to a good rebirth. The word is actually *duggati* and *suggati*. *Gati* means to go, destination. *Du* means not good and *su* means good. So you've got *dukkha*, hard to bear suffering, and *sukha*, easy to bear happiness.

The story goes that all members of a certain family at Sāvatti were followers of an ascetic. They did not want their children to mix with the Buddha's followers' children. They specifically forbade their children to go to Jetavana monastery. But once all the children were playing in the vicinity of the monastery and got thirsty. They asked one of their friends whose parents were followers of the Buddha to go to the monastery and bring them some water. The boy went inside, paid respects to the Buddha, and told him about his friends who were not allowed to enter. The Buddha invited the children in to have a drink and gave them a discourse, and in the end all the children became his followers.

Now when they came home, they told their parents what had happened. The parents were very angry and accused the children of disloyalty. But the neighbours, who were followers of the Buddha, were able to change their view gradually, and before long the whole family converted to the Buddha's teachings. When the Buddha heard this, he spoke that verse.

And the little addition for the next verse, the one that goes to heaven: In order to ascertain a good future existence, both in this life and in the next one, we should always understand and distinguish right from wrong, good from bad. We also must use our understanding and insight to be able to decide which is which. Without this understanding, we might choose wrongly and believe the good to be bad and vice versa. And in this way, our future existence will not be good.

Actually there are a lot of things to discuss there, just the meaning of various things like what we should be ashamed of or not. When we feel shame, that's a loss of self-esteem, isn't it? And if we do something that makes other people see us in a bad light, then obviously we suffer from this embarrassment or shame.

There are things like when you go to a hospital or a doctor's or the dentist. When you go to the doctor or the dentist or the hospital, everybody has their name on the lapel: Mary, Barbara, Fred. They always speak to you in your first name. Now my first name is John. Nobody ever called me John. I was always called Pete. But legally speaking my name's John, so they say "John do this," "Oh yes John, good to see you, John, John, John." At the end you say something like "Thank you very much Mary," and oh my goodness, do they give you a dirty look.

I was at the hospital for a procedure and I was introduced to Sister Margaret something. And again it's all this "John, John, John" and I said "Thank you very much Sister." Oh my God, it was like an insult. I find that very confusing really. There are little overt rules and covert rules, things that you don't know about, and then suddenly you break them and it's all embarrassing.

When it comes to danger, I always think that's really to do with indulgence. Because even we think that everything in moderation, so a little bit of indulgence is not a problem. But unfortunately, it still ties us into the world of the senses.

Finding fault in what's not fault, I think that's being judgmental rather than judicious. And in the final verse, I think when it says, because these four verses all have these two last lines: those who take up wrong views go to hell, those who take up right views go to a good rebirth. This not knowing fault as fault and the faultless as the faultless, that would be referring back to all of them, I think.

The important thing here is this wrong view, because everything begins with wrong view. It starts the Eightfold Noble Path. If you've got wrong view, then you're going to have not very good attitudes. If you don't have good attitude, which is the second on the path, obviously we're going to make mistakes.

And there is a distinction to be made between right and wrong and good and bad, I think, although here the commentary doesn't make that distinction. I think if we say something is good and bad, we are referring to something moral, something ethical. Right and wrong, I would have thought, might be referring to institutional laws which are made up. Well, institutions are described by their laws.

As a monastic I have a rule not to eat after twelve, not to take any substance after twelve. I'm allowed certain things but not a meal. And that's not a moral rule. I mean for twenty years there wasn't that rule amongst monks. It was just lay people complained that monks and nuns were turning up at all sorts of times, sometimes twice or more a day. So they got fed up with it and complained to the Buddha. So then he made this rule: you have to go out in the morning and eat before twelve.

Well many monks didn't like it. They grumbled and he said, "Well look, if you belong to this dispensation, if you want to be my disciples, then this is what you do." So I presume a lot of them wandered off actually.

I thought those things about good and bad and all that, there are many of the *Dhammapada* verses concerned with that, but since this is in the chapter on hell, I thought we'd have a look at the realms.

Now these six realms: there's the *deva* realm, the happy realm, the happiest of realms, and there's the *asura* realm. They're the realm of the angry gods. And then there's the human realm. And then there are these lower realms of the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the hell realm. And they each have a particular mental state that goes with it.

The heavenly realms are obviously there because we've acted in a good way, but it produces a certain vanity, a certain smugness, and the person loses touch with ordinary suffering. Eventually that *kamma*

dies out and they end up in another realm dependent on their past *kamma*. But you can see that this is also something which relates entirely to human beings. These people are incredibly rich and live on yachts. They're hardly going to worry about people who are at the moment destitute. That's for somebody else to worry about.

The angry God realm is driven by jealousy. That's interesting. And these two are always warring. The angry gods are always having a go at these *devas*. The *devas* are always winning. And in a sense, that tells us something about ourselves, how we relate to people who have been more fortunate than us or who have better abilities than we have. And that jealousy often puts us into a very antagonistic relationship with people.

Often we'll say something like, "Oh, I envy you." But that's often, I think, in its more positive sense, is really praising the person. And it's something that you would like to be. But when that envy begins to want what the other person has, and then you begin to dislike and hate the other person for what they've got, then I think we're moving into the realms of jealousy.

The human realm is driven, of course, by desire, unquenchable thirst, as we now know from neoliberalism and consumerism. So that's pretty straightforward. And of course, that does draw us into, again, this negativity of getting rid of anything which doesn't satisfy us.

Now, the lower realms: the animal realm is driven by ignorance. And it's often a case that somebody might die in a state of dullness, alcoholic stupor, so they might end up in an animal realm. But in terms of a human being, that's where your intelligence is now. You've dropped down, you've lost your human intelligence.

And the hungry ghost realm is driven by greed, by a total commitment to greed. And it's a worse world than human beings. It's insatiable greed. And they're often depicted with big bellies and tiny mouths. If you look in the mirror and you've got a big belly and a small mouth, then you're probably in the hungry ghost realm.

But then finally hell, which is driven by anger, but I think the worst thing is cruelty, of course. Any form of hatred or cruelty would put you into a hell realm.

Now, whether these realms exist or not, of course, is just a matter of personal belief or understanding. Some people in meditation say they've experienced these things. But they obviously relate directly to the human realm as well. And we move in and out of these realms. So whether these realms actually exist as separate realms can be taken as something that actually, that's the way it is, or it could be that there is a realm where spirits, for want of a better word... these words have been debased by science. Ghosts, spirits, disincarnated beings... one gets lost for words really. But if we just use spirits, that there may just be a world of spirits where beings are just like here, either full of greed or full of hatred and so on.

But hell is something that all these religions like to pump as a fear factor.

The one I actually like, this is from Thailand: you've got people being put in boiling pots of water. There's somebody here who's being tied to something and somebody's poking them. Oh look, a crucifixion. This is a modern picture of... there's another one here, this is a modern picture of somebody being sawed in half. So lots of good imagery.

Oh, this is from Tibet. So you're in a great big pot of boiling water and everybody looks as though they've been stabbed. It's all good stuff, isn't it?

But this one from the West, of course, this is Hieronymus Bosch. He's got you being eaten here. Look, you've got people being eaten and people strung out on guitars. And liars, I suppose that music was seen as something not particularly leading to heaven. Look at this rabbit chewing on somebody's foot.

But I think the best one I came across was this one, and this is from Thailand. Look at that. That gets it across, doesn't it? It's left to your imagination what the heck's going on underneath there. We're all trying to get out. We're all reaching up somewhere or other to get out of hell.

And I'm reminded of that sign on Dante's hell: abandon all hope, ye who enter here. The thing is, of course, that in Buddhist understanding, it's not eternal. So that's a relief, isn't it?

In the *Abhidhamma*, by the way, they do create even more realms, up to thirty-one, which has to do with the *jhānas*. So once you're into absorptions, and if you were very good at getting into these absorptions, you would end up in different realms.

I suppose the last thing I'd like to say is... oh yeah, I've got a story. At the monastery I was at, Kanduboda, one Christmas, it was Christmas because I usually went to a friend for egg on toast. When I came back, I was told that a father had come with his daughter. And the daughter, who was around about ten or eleven, had kept saying to him in the evening, "I'm writing a biography of the Buddha." And he would humour her: "Oh that's very good," all that. And she knew he didn't believe her.

And one evening she said this to him, "I'm going up to this particular realm to write the story of the Buddha." And she rose up in front of him and disappeared. And so he thought, "Well I better take her to a monastery." So he brought her to Kanduboda.

And the monks questioned her and she said she was an *Arahant* and that she had been born specifically to help her grandfather, and that she would go to this realm where the Buddha was and all the other saints, all the other *Arahants*, and she was writing his story. And when they questioned her about meditation, she seemed to understand it. And she wouldn't pay respects to the monks because she was an *Arahant*.

Now, unfortunately, I went back, I came back to Britain at one point and then came back to Kanduboda. And unfortunately, they'd lost contact with her. So I don't know what happened to her.

But obviously, I'd love to have heard what she had to say when she was a little bit more grown up. So that makes you think, doesn't it?

Just a final thing. Nagarjuna, the great metaphysical philosopher of the Mahayana, points out that when we talk about *samsāra*—so that's a word I haven't mentioned up until now—*samsāra* is a word which just means "onward going," and it refers to this constant rebirthing, rebirthing, which at the time of the Buddha, for most people, would have been something quite horrible, because you never knew where you were going to be reborn, and it would happen. Some thought it was just fate, and that would be your fate, lifetime after lifetime after lifetime. There were materialists, of course, who thought that life ended with death. But the general understanding was that you would be constantly reborn.

What Nagarjuna points out, of course, is that what makes it *samsāra*, the world of suffering, is our relationship to it. Because, remember, everything we're experiencing is being created by this psychophysical organism right here and now, and we're living in the world that we're actually creating. And once we have changed our relationship to that world, of no longer clinging to it, no longer seeing it as a place to find any sort of permanent happiness, letting go of all our irritations and fears, then of course it becomes *Nibbāna*.

So *Nibbāna* is really—one way of looking at it—is just changing our relationship to the world that we're actually experiencing right here and now. And every time we're in a state of calm, equanimous, loving, compassionate states, then we have to ask ourselves, am I actually suffering? So it gives us a little hint as to the path that we're actually moving on when we practice meditation and in daily life.

So he made no distinction whatsoever between *samsāra* and *Nibbāna*. It was all to do with relationship.

So I can only hope a revision of the six realms will be an occasion for you to really work on your practice, and be liberated in no time at all. Peace and joy.

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