

Empowerment through the Dhamma

Venerable sisters and brothers,
Dear sisters and brothers,

I am so glad and deeply honoured to be here with you and I am grateful for the opportunity to share a few thoughts on empowerment embedded in the study and practice of Dhamma.

It is easy to speak about empowerment in an atmosphere like this. With body and mind I can feel the empowerment that is radiating from this assembly, has been present in this very place for the last 60 years. Here the empowerment through Dhamma has become manifest exactly 60 years ago and has borne fruit ever since. It is the fruit of liberation, liberation in all forms and shapes.

Before I turn to Dhamma empowerment, the highest and most mature empowerment, let me take a look at more conventional views of empowerment, like personal and social empowerment. These are of course an indispensable part of a wholesome human life. Personal empowerment is characterised by self-respect, self-reliance, education, understanding and openness. Social empowerment is based on respect for all humanity and the natural environment. It includes social responsibility and social action to improve the living conditions of those in need. And still, when empowerment is embedded into the context of Dhamma it changes its character from being dependent, unsteady and often even misguided into a determined, straightforward and sustained empowerment, for the wholesome benefit of all sentient beings.

While working for the empowerment of self and others, we take our refuge in the Buddha and his Dhamma, as well as the Fourfold Sangha, and slowly grow into a deeper understanding of reality that goes beyond the division and separation of self and others. Guided by the Dhamma we will not be fooled by illusions and wrong views, by our own likes and dislikes. Guided by the Dhamma, our insight and understanding will be developed and enhanced and we unwaveringly will keep track on the middle way to Wisdom and Compassion.

We can experience considerable inspiration and motivation from a coming together of friends like this one today and especially from epoch-making events like the one we are commemorating These days. There, 60 years ago hundreds of thousands, determined to shake off the fetters and gags binding people for ages followed the wise leadership of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Gates and doors that had been barred and locked for centuries were pushed wide open.

For this generation it has become less difficult to follow this track. Just like smaller animals find it easier to cross the forest in the footprints of a large elephant, we can follow the trail paved for us by our ancestors. And still we find it is a challenge, it is not an easy task. It needs our resolve and our action to carry on this liberating project, and it needs the guidelines of the Dhamma and the guiding advice of those who skilfully spread the Dhamma.

It is beneficial to admire such a Bodhisattva like Dr. Ambedkar, to be his grateful followers, but is it enough, is this all we can do? Or are there more fetters and gags to be dropped, more gates and doors to be pushed open? Is it our historic challenge, are we ourselves to direct our steps on the path of the Bodhisattvas develop these qualities, become Bodhisattvas ourselves, or as my dear friend Mangesh once made a plea to us: “Be your own Babasaheb!”

So, how do we start to become Bodhisattvas, to be Bodhisattvas? Where are the manuals and user instructions on how to become a Bodhisattva?

These questions remind me of the days when I asked my teacher if I could take Bodhisattva vows. He quoted the Diamond Sutra to me saying:

“Subhūti, If a Bodhisattva abides in the signs of self, person, sentient being, or life-span, she or he is not a Bodhisattva.”

“Now meditate on this and as soon as you have realised no more clinging to self, person, sentient being and life-span, you tell me.”

This did not, however, lift me to the pure fields of a Bodhisattva, but saw me landing in a hell of doubts. I had fought my life-way up from a very deprived childhood with parents considerably traumatised by 6 years of war and had escaped poverty and being a nobody. I had achieved this through education, academic studies and a well-paid post as a teacher. I had left behind the bondage of a suppressive dominant religion, had studied Marxism and Psychology, and taken a stand against warmongers and exploiters. I was well on track growing self-respect and enjoying social recognition and prestige as a person. In spite of that, or rather due to that I obviously could not be a Bodhisattva.

Returning to my teacher after quite a while without finding a way out of this dilemma, I heard him say: “Forget about yourself for a moment and feel the position of someone in need of help. Now in the position of a deprived, downtrodden individual, you may meet somebody, who is not a real Bodhisattva, maybe just a 10% Bodhisattva, a part-time Bodhisattva, willing to help, showing understanding for you and your misery and offering her or his support. Would you in your miserable condition rather wait for a 100% Bodhisattva turning up, or would you just take the helping hand stretched out to you at that very moment?”

And with tongue-in-cheek and a smile on his face my teacher, Genro Daiosho said: “I tell you another thing; a 10% Bodhisattva who becomes active, will be a 20% Bodhisattva before long and quickly growing.”

I have kept his words in my heart ever since: “Forget about yourself for a moment!” If you act as a Bodhisattva, you become a Bodhisattva.

Well grounded empowerment also means realising our connectedness in a social and natural context. Whatever we are, whatever we seem to have achieved, we owe it to a great deal to the friendly help coming from others, to advantageous natural and social conditions, to the arising of everything dependent on everything else, to put the Buddha’s great explanation of the world in simple terms.

Empowerment also means leaving the past behind, means having learned a lesson from the past, and letting go. But on the other hand we should not believe that the

past is gone if we let it go. It returns in different forms and shapes whenever the situation is ripe for it. We can draw the strength of empowerment from the past if we remember how we ourselves have overcome a difficult situation, have achieved something liberating, when we remember our ancestors having endured hardship, overcome hurdles, learned from defeats. If we celebrate liberating moments in history like we are doing today, this looking back with gratitude and joy can be very empowering.

But when the past returns in the shape of disempowerment, we should be aware, wide awake, we should usher it out whenever it enters our mind. It tries to tell us not to reach for the stars, keep to sacred scriptures, old rules and traditions, bow our heads to the powerful, consider ourselves insignificant, unimportant and inferior and tell us in ever so convincing words to be satisfied with what we have achieved already, and now settle for what we have got.

The Dhamma teaches us that whatever thoughts arise in our mind, we should make sure our thoughts are not in opposition to loving kindness, to compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. What a great gift which we can receive anew every day when we open our hands to receive it, open our hearts to harbour it.

The Dhamma also invites us to have unshakeable faith and trust. Because only through it we are tapping the source of empowerment, and connecting to the stream of liberation. Every now and then withdrawing from the noises of society, retreating to stillness, regaining inner peace, we watch the life stream of our breath, and breathing in we become aware that we are one with all Buddhas and breathing out we overcome the illusion of powerlessness and develop a thousand helping hands to ease the suffering of the world. Our hitherto blurred or hidden Buddhanature comes to light and to life inside ourselves as soon as we deeply take refuge in the Triratna, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Fourfold Sangha.

We will need all the skills and tools the Dhamma has to offer to fend off the elements of disempowerment, the adversaries of liberation. One of these adversaries comes in a very well established disguise that has injected its destructive poison deep into society and even into the body of the Fourfold Sangha, the male and female monks, the male and female householders.

It is the clinging to traditional gender roles which is poisoning men into believing they are superior to women, poisoning women into believing they are inferior to men. The great female Buddhist teacher and academic, Rita M. Gross never grew tired, as long as she lived, to hold up her liberating banner saying "Clinging to gender subverts enlightenment and liberation!" Meaning to say that radically leaving behind all traditional thinking on the roles of women and men is absolutely necessary, is not just liberating for women, it is also liberating for men. For the benefit of everybody, no matter which gender, it opens the way to deeply understanding, practising and realising the Dhamma.

Or is there anyone who believes that a man who suppresses a woman is on the path of liberation, or is a valuable part of a social liberation movement?

I admit, it may not be easy for a young man growing up in an atmosphere of domestic violence to break with this tradition completely and leave it behind once and for all, but it is indispensable and essential on the way to liberation and empowerment. Let us have no doubt about that. Following the example of the Buddha himself, we will not be thinking in categories of above and below, of

good and better, of superior and inferior, no, within the Fourfold Sangha we are sisters and brothers of equal standing and thus make this noble Fourfold Sangha a

strong and invincible vehicle of liberation.

Let me share a few concluding thoughts with you at this wonderful conference in this warm and inspiring atmosphere of friends.

Liberation needs empowerment, needs self-respect, a clear sense of responsibility and deep faith in the Dhamma, in ourselves, in education, in friendship and solidarity, in well organised networks of cooperation, in liberating social action and the spreading of the liberating message.

When the liberating message of the Dhamma reached me some 40 years ago in an unlikely place like the centre of Europe, I felt its strong call and decided to follow this call, not always being able to keep the right track, but again and again returning to it.

When I first came across a book on Dr. Ambedkar in the late 1970s I was fascinated and inspired by his example. Shortly after I publicly came out as a Buddhist in spite of the fact that this step did not meet with much understanding, as it was not really accepted in the society in which I lived. But obviously the causes and conditions around me, some inspiring people and the few words of Dhamma that had reached me supported me in my resolve. Nowadays Buddhists are well respected in my country.

Much more difficult was the situation for our friends in a neighbouring country, in Hungary, with whom I came into contact some 6 years ago through a letter from my friend Mangesh. He pointed out to me that some determined people there also were inspired by the wisdom of Babasaheb and were establishing and running the “Dr. Ambedkar High School” in their small town. Through education they had opened a new perspective in life for the socially excluded and disadvantaged Roma or Gypsy population there. They were ready to share their empowering project with me, so that I could take inspiration from their example and spread it among friends in my own country as well as within the European networks which I am part of.

As a final conclusion I am happy to say that the shining example of empowerment and liberation through the Dhamma as handed down to us by Dr. Ambedkar and his supporters of the 1950s, as well as the dedicated generations down to this very day has not only spread its light in this country, or in Europe, but is clearing the way for the human race around the globe to step out of the deep darkness of exclusion and suppression. The doors for living together in peace, freedom, equality, in brotherhood and sisterhood can be opened. Let us take all necessary steps to walk through joyfully, let us stop all those who might be trying to block our way. Let us stand together empowered through the Dhamma!
JAI BHIM!