5. Right Awareness: Introduction to Vipassanā

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 28:34

The purpose of this little talk really is to make sure that we're all fairly clear as to what the Buddha means by right awareness.

I always think it's good to go over a little bit of his biography, which makes it, I think, more plain to us.

Remember, he was brought up in an aristocratic family. Later tradition, of course, builds him up into this huge kingship and all that sort of stuff, but basically his father was a vassal to the local king, and his people were just part of that kingdom at the top of India, which borders Nepal. Being of that caste, the Kshatriya caste, the warrior caste, his education would have been mainly about flashy swords and shields and maybe a bit of astrology—things like that. There wouldn't be any cooking or domestic stuff. So we can presume that he lived a fairly happy life, sensually anyway, just getting what he wants.

Somewhere in his twenties he gets married, and round about twenty-nine he leaves his wife and newborn child. For us, of course, that sounds terrible—desertion. But you have to remember it was an extended family; it wasn't as though his wife was out on the street. But if somebody does that, if somebody leaves a home and the people they love, then one presumes that there is something very urgent in that need. And we can only presume that he had what we would call an existential crisis.

Remember, it's put in that mythological sense that as he's taken out to do some hunting, he comes across a very sick person, a very old person, a corpse, and an ascetic sitting under a tree. They're called messengers from the gods, and what the myth is trying to tell us is that somewhere in his mid-twenties he came out of youth and realized that in fact what he was heading for was sickness, old age, and death. That can come as a shock to some people—this realization that all the effort we put into life, everything we do personally, just ends up with a load of ashes scattered here and there. That basic meaninglessness of life.

In his day, of course, it would have also included this idea of rebirth or reincarnation, which meant that having done all that which was completely meaningless, ending up as a pile of ashes, he'd have to do it all over again. And all over again. And over again. It just seemed to be a ceaseless process of life after life going through this same routine. That was partly the despair of the age, and it was mirrored in a lot of people moving out of lay life into some sort of ascetic practice. There were many other religious teachers; perhaps the other famous one was Mahavira, the person who founded the Jains. He was a contemporary of the Buddha.

So when he left, a bit like the hippies in the sixties who left everything for sex, drugs, and rock and roll—just for a different purpose—we have to imagine that he's in a pretty turbulent mental state when he

leaves home. It's put mythologically as in the dark night. He leaves on his horse, Kanthaka, with his servant. He goes to the river, crosses the river—the Rubicon. A change of life. Cuts his hair off, all that sort of stuff. And even his horse dies of grief. Can you imagine? It's a terrible time.

So now he's left what we would call the sensual life, the life of pleasure, the consumerist life. What drives him is this essential sense of uselessness about it, the vapid uselessness of sensual pleasure if you're seeking true happiness, everlasting happiness.

The first thing he does is join teachers who show him how to establish very beautiful states of mind, blissful states. This you'll find in all religions—the ecstasies. The great thing about jhāna, the absorptions as we call them, is that you don't need anything at all once you can access them.

Last night we did a little bit of mettā practice. Just by repeating that gently over and over, there's a sort of draw inward, and the heart begins to respond. There's a lovely beauty that comes to it, and the body feels good. As you draw inward to that, you leave the body into a beautiful state of the inner mind. And you can stay there. So all you need is a loincloth and a bit of food. You need a little bowl, hang about, go and get your porridge, come back, sit under a tree, and get blissed out all day.

The problem with that, he found, was of course when he came out of it, he was still the depressed, anxious Siddhartha Gotama. Even though he had now found a joy far superior to the ordinary transient pleasures of life—something you could really maintain within yourself, and when you become adept you could just click into it, settle down, and in you went into this inner ecstasy—there was this sense of uselessness again, because eventually you came out of it. It wasn't eternal, and although it wasn't based on anything outside yourself, it was based on some technique, some ability within yourself.

He had two teachers, and both of them took him to a point where they actually invited him to come and teach with them. But he hadn't really solved this gnawing problem in his heart concerning the meaninglessness of life, that true existential angst.

The next thing he tries are mortification exercises. For this he was obviously influenced by the Nigaṇṭha, the Jain founder. The Jains have this sort of idea that the jīva, the soul, is weighed down by these clumps of chewing gum—karmic clumps. When you do something wrong, it's like a splodge on your soul and it keeps it weighted down. The way to get rid of it was through these heavy mortification exercises, and all these splodges fell off and the soul rose to the highest heaven. It's very material, a very concrete idea of what happened.

Of course there's a truth in it—that once our defilements disappear, we enter into a very beautiful state. The idea, or the understanding, was that the problem was the body. You wouldn't have greed if you didn't feed your hunger. If you let go of all sex and just denied your body, then you wouldn't have any lust. So the idea of the ascetic life was to deny the body, to draw it down to essentially just bones and a bit of muscle, and keep yourself away from the world. In which sense everything would finally just drop off. The

Jain saint is one who starves themselves to death, by which time of course they're not attached to anything. They also understood the role of desire. That was coming through from the Brahminical tradition too, the idea that the problem was desire. Socrates understood that—that the problem was this desire, this attachment to things.

So he tried these exercises, and he talks of himself being able to hold his spine through his stomach. Have you tried that? He got thin, really thin. But unfortunately, he still ended up being miserable. There came a point where he realized this wasn't taking him anywhere either. He almost killed himself, you could say. At that point, he leaves his companions, his five companions.

Now we can only presume that he's in a state of despair, because he's gone out with this real hope of finding an end to this inner suffering, this inner meaninglessness of life. He's tried all these famous teachers and he's almost killed himself with these mortification exercises, and he's still stuck. He still hasn't answered this deep inner problem. So one can only presume that he's feeling pretty wretched, standing on the roadside. Some of you will know that Sujātā comes with an offering of rice pudding for the local god.

And seeing this poor wretch, she offers it to him. In the literature, you'll see that he's shining like a god and she mistakes him for a god, but basically he's pretty miserable. And eating this food revives him.

Now, shortly after that time—and this is why we call him self-enlightened—he has a memory. The memory concerns watching his father, as a child, doing a ploughing ceremony to open the ploughing season. He remembers the state he was in while watching his father perform this ceremony. The state he's in is an absorption state, but it's also full of inquiry, full of curiosity. It's the first time he's really become aware of this ceremony, and he's a child.

At this point, his whole practice turns around on itself. He's no longer trying to escape suffering by finding some other heavenly state. He now turns upon suffering and asks the question: how does suffering arise in the first place? And it's with that new inspiration that he goes to sit under a tree. He sees no other way apart from this particular approach, and he determines to sit there either to crack this problem or die. Lucky for him, lucky for us, he cracks it in a mere six hours. And from that point on, something has deeply changed within him. His relationship to the world has been completely turned around.

So now let's just go back a step and consider this state that he remembers from childhood. If we take anybody under six or seven years of age, when you see a child looking at something they've not seen before—like a beetle—their eyes become fixed on it. They even stop blinking. The jaw drops and they look gormless. They're completely fixated on it. There's no thought in the mind because they can't describe it. There's no concept to attach to it. And then when it's completely absorbed, they turn around and say, "What is it?" And the beautiful parent says, "That's a beetle." From that point on, that child never sees a beetle again. Because every time we see a beetle, we put the experience of all past beetles onto that beetle.

In other words, the life that we lead is constantly being distorted by concepts, by our history. In order to find this path to the end of suffering, we have to go back to that mental state. We have to go back to what Zen calls the original mind—the original mind of the child. And that is our difficulty. Our difficulty is to draw this intelligence, the Buddha within, to draw it out of its confusion with the intellect. All meditation techniques are trying to make us do that. That's the prime object. All this stuff about mindfulness and constant attention, concentration—all of that is subservient to the point of trying to purify this intuitive intelligence we have.

So for instance, in this technique—and I'll go into it in more detail this evening—the idea of using a single word is at least to draw the intellect down to a singular concrete concept. Rising, falling. There's no thinking around it. And at that level, it's possible to draw this intelligence directly into the experience that's happening, which is at the level of sensation, of feeling. Whatever techniques you've practiced, you'll see that the whole technique always draws you back to your body, back to your sense base. Because it's there that you begin to rediscover this way of looking at things.

The practice of quiet abiding that we do is to clarify that awareness—an awareness which is not engaging, which is completely open. Just like the child's mouth dropped, just like its eyes fixed. Just receiving. And it's only when that has been established that we bring in this quality of curiosity. It's an open curiosity, the curiosity of a cat. It mustn't come from any expectation or any ideas. It's just a complete state of curiosity, best coming from a position of don't know.

So that's what we mean by right awareness in terms of its quality. But this curiosity, remember, has already been educated to look at certain things, and that's where the three characteristics come in. Anybody who's into science, anybody who's into nature, an artist—they all have to develop that open-mindedness again, or else they just repeat. The whole point about an original artist is that they see the world differently. To do that, they have to drop all the art that they've learnt before. A philosopher has to drop all past philosophy in order to see in a new way. A scientist has to investigate not from the point of view of what has already been discovered, but from what has not been discovered. It's the new question, the new way of looking at things that brings discovery.

But even so, there is that scientific knowledge, there is that philosophical knowledge, and there is all the artistry sitting as it were behind, supporting the looking. So with us, it's the Buddha Dhamma, and especially the teaching around impermanence, the role of desire as the cause of psychological suffering, and the fact that nothing has any substance. Nothing's real. You can't point to something and say, "This is real, this is me." Because every time you hold on to something that's me, it's constantly disappearing.

We understand that, and it lies as it were underneath the looking. We're not thinking about it. We're not bringing it into the practice. It's there. It's already there because we've been taught to look like that. And so when we sit, we put all that to the side. At the end of last night's instructions, I said, "Putting all instruction aside." So you use your instructions, you use your techniques to get yourself primed to a point where

you're just observing, just feeling, just experiencing what's drawing your attention within the field of awareness. It's simply that. And it's the simplicity which foxes us. We're looking for something a little bit cleverer than that, something a bit more demanding.

So as long as we understand that, in our practice we keep bringing ourselves back to that simplicity. Then slowly but surely, that original mind begins to manifest much more obviously to us, and we know when we're in it and we know when we're not in it.

Now the other thing is, of course, to bring that same sense of mindfulness into daily life. So this morning we were talking about work, about actually bringing it into everything we do—when we're conversing with each other, when we're thinking about something like planning our holiday, when we're doing something. So obviously there, it's a different type of awareness. The awareness now is into action, into doing. Before, it was abstracted; it had found this observation post within ourselves. But now it has to re-enter.

He has to re-enter the psychophysical organism—body, mind, and heart—and through it into the world. Once that happens, the idea is not so much to be observing ourselves, but to maintain that wide open awareness so that we are also aware not only of what we're doing, but of what we're feeling.

We know, for instance, when we meet somebody and feel a high degree of irritation and hatred. On the surface of things, I may be presenting a very kind, lovable, huggable person. But inside, I just want to strangle them. So here I am, not getting caught up in either, but putting my attention more in the process of observing.

When I'm at work and outwardly doing my job very well, all very diligent, inwardly I'm utterly and completely bored—and I'm aware of that. Somehow I can stand above it. I can be with the boredom and yet pay attention to what I'm doing, coming from a different place: a place of wisdom, a place of compassion, whereby I can actually put my energy into the right intention.

I can only do that if I can dissociate from, disidentify from, this boredom, this irritation, this depression, this anxiety. As soon as I drop into an identity—"I am bored"—then who's going to get me out of that? As soon as I say "I am depressed," that's it, I'm stuck.

The whole point of this meditation is to continue that sense of objectivity within us—not suppressing it, not pushing it aside, not turning away from it, but allowing it to express itself at that level of awareness somewhere within the field. Meanwhile, my attention is on what I'm supposed to be doing. And with that attention there comes an intention. Whenever I place my attention, it must be an act of intention, and that's what's conditioning me.

So every time I start a job, every time I meet somebody, every time I go to work, every time I come to sit, there has to be just that moment of inward gazing. There has to be a sort of global awareness of both what's outside and what's inside. And then, having recognized it, I can make a skillful decision as to what

I'm going to do.

That's the distinction between this vipassanā, which is about investigating the three characteristics, and mindfulness in daily life. What daily mindfulness draws us to, as the Buddha says, is clear comprehension—that's his phrase. When you're stretching your arm, you know you're stretching your arm. When you open the fridge, you know you're opening the fridge. When you're closing the fridge, you know you're closing the fridge. In other words, you're not walking out of the kitchen slamming the fridge behind you. When the bell goes for lunch, your mind is not already in the dining room while your body catches up ten minutes afterward. Your mind knows that it's going to the dining room, but your attention is right on your footsteps. It's that knowledge of where you're going somewhere in the future, but bringing yourself constantly back to what is actually happening in the present moment.

This distinction has to be made. Otherwise, you might make the mistake of always trying to observe yourself at all times of the day, and that just drives you potty, frankly. On the other hand, you might think that when you're meditating, you're trying to create something, trying to see the three characteristics. That's wrong effort.

You have to have a certain faith that there is within us this quality—this Buddha nature, call it what you wish—which is constantly seeking its own liberation. That's what's suffering. And it's constantly seeking understanding, crying out all the time: "Get that meditator out of the way!" So as soon as you see yourself trying to do something, trying to see, trying to attain, turn on it and say, "You're the meditator. Get out of the way." And then start again.

During the day you can practice this open awareness. As you walk around the grounds, for instance, put your attention on a flower and see how the mind immediately tries to position it—what type of flower it is, describing it, how wonderful it is. Let all that pass. Just keep the eye on the flower and be aware of the process of perception. How is the eye seeing the flower? Not what you think about it, whether you've seen one before and all that rubbish—just how is the eye seeing the flower?

When you're sitting or walking outside and you close your eyes and start listening, see how the mind wants to know what bird it is and where it is. Just let that go and put your attention entirely on the process of hearing. What is it you're actually hearing?

In this way, you're constantly drawing this intelligence out of its confusion with the intellect, its confusion with history. And it's very simple to do because all you have to do is relax. Just relax and put your attention directly on the sense base.

When you go for a meal—and I'll remind you of this when we go for lunch—as soon as you put food on the tongue, there's always that comparison. "This isn't curry. This isn't pizza." Or, "Oh, this is wonderful!" Let all that pass. Put your attention directly on the tongue, and you're back to being a child.

You're back to being a person who can directly experience what's coming from the body.

And that's the beginning of our practice. All the time, all the time, to come back to the body. The body offers us its sensations, its feelings. It offers us moods and emotions as felt sense. And by drawing ourselves into that, leaving thought alone, we begin to have these deeper insights into our nature.

And before no length of time, we will surely be liberated. The scriptures talk about so-and-so having listened to the word of the Buddha, went away into the jungle and forest to practice, and in no length of time became fully liberated. And the commentarial gloss is "after twenty-five years." So it's a gradual process. A gradual process.

Very good. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your fierce practice, liberate yourself sooner rather than later.

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