The Problem of Identity

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 39:05

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I'm just tackling the problem of identity, which is core to the Buddha's understanding of our problem — identity, and perhaps to just understand how we create ourselves continuously. The Buddha dissects the human experience both in the present moment and as a flow, as something that happens over time. In the dissection in the present moment, like a cross-section, he splits us up into five parts that he calls aggregates, because they're just heaps — they're just a collection of the same things.

So the first one is all our physicality, the physicality — just the body itself in its gross material form. But it also means how we actually experience the body at that very basic level that many of you will have experienced when, for instance, you go into a pain and what you're actually feeling in it is tension or heat or something like that. So that's the point where the body and mind meet. So these are two distinct things in Buddhism.

The next one is feelings. So feelings — the distinction between feelings and ordinary sensations is the definition we put on them. So a feeling is perceived as either pleasant or unpleasant, or neutral. But if you ever get close to a neutral sensation, really go into it, you'll find that it divides into something slightly pleasant or slightly unpleasant, because that's the basic duality within which we live. The world is either experiencing something pleasant or unpleasant. Can't do anything about that. Just the way it is.

Then there's a whole section of perceptions. So perceptions are a mental image of what it is that we're experiencing, and it produces our memory. And the perceptions are not... I mean, normally speaking, they're talked of as very basic things like the colour and shape of something or just the basic aroma of something. But that process of *saññā*, as some of you know, actually builds up on itself into the higher concept. So a concept is another perception, another way of perceiving the world. They tumble on each other until they become more and more complex through our thought system. So these are all separate from feeling — they're mental things. They are either images or this very fine energy that we call thought, reason, logic, whatever you want to call it, the intellect.

Then there's this whole business of *saṅkhāra*. Now, the reason why he's partitioned all these is really to point us to this business of *saṅkhāra*. So, the thing about *saṅkhāra*, sometimes translated as volitional formation — it never makes sense to me that — but the real point of it is that this is where the will is. This is where we actually create. The others are given as a human being. We have a body. It offers sensations. It offers feelings. We perceive them in such and such a way. But this whole business of *saṅkhāra*,

volitional formations, includes all our, what we would recognize as our emotional thought life — that whole business of the creation that we can manufacture within ourselves through our thought. I mean, in its highest extent it would be things like philosophy and art, but it's ordinary — the ordinary sillinesses that come up in the mind is also part of that complex. And that's a heap, but the important thing about this heap is — will come back to that if I remember.

Then the next bit is consciousness. Now this consciousness is a problem because the English words don't find it very difficult to describe this. It's the act of cognition where all these other factors come together to form a picture. So the only way I can think of it — the only example would be, say, a computer screen or a television screen where a lot of things are coming up from behind of which we are not conscious and suddenly appear on a screen as an act of seeing, an act of, you might call it, computer consciousness — an act of cognition. And there's an understanding involved in it. There's an internal understanding. It has an internal logic. So when you are watching something on television or doing something on a screen, it's presenting you with an already manufactured picture which makes sense in itself.

The problem arises when we try to understand what the Buddha meant by this *satipaññā*. So in the main discourse where he's really putting forward this process of how we become liberated — it's called the *Sati paṭṭhāna* discourse, discourse on how to establish this right awareness — because a robber has awareness but it's not quite right. It doesn't have what you might call an ethical juice, or the wrong ethical duty.

And this, by the way, this discourse is not delivered to monastics. It's not delivered to people who sit on the trees meditating. This is delivered to the Kurus, the Kurus of Dhamma. And Kurus of Dhamma was very close to modern day Delhi. He travelled quite a bit, hundreds of miles. And he'd been there, given his teachings. And when he revisited, he was quite taken by the fact that people were following his teachings. I myself also find myself amazed when people... So he gave them this talk to the Kurus. This is a talk that he gave. This is the jewel of the collection. He gave this to lay people, and that's really worth remembering, because in the Buddhist scene one thinks that monastics have the better of it. After all, they don't have to work and they just hang about doing nothing getting enlightened. Some of them do, but in fact the Buddha is quite clear that emotional life — that also leads us into always trying to manipulate the world so that we can re-establish that same happiness, same emotional happiness.

So on a more gentle note, seeking happiness in nature. So one goes out, one is at one with nature. What does that one-ness mean when people say I felt that one with nature? See what happened? Now remember that the world out there is not what we're experiencing. We're experiencing only what our senses can give us. When I look at a tree, I can only see the tree if my eyes allow me to see the tree. I can only feel the wind on my skin as my skin will allow me to feel the wind. I can never know the tree in itself, or how other people see the tree. They can tell me, but I can't see it. People can tell me how they feel the wind, I can only do it by analogy, because I feel the wind.

So, getting lost — when somebody has a oneness in nature, what they're actually saying is, for one

moment, they're absorbed into the perception of nature that they're creating. It comes as a mystical experience to some because they've never been at one with anything. They've always been at two. There's always been me and something else. And just for one moment, they're out in this beautiful place, suffused with the joy that nature can bring, that sense of beauty and aesthetics, a beautiful valley or something like that. And just for one minute, the giving, the loss of a self, the absorption into that experience.

And in a sense, of course, it is a mystical experience if you oppose it to ordinary daily life where there's always a me doing something, there's always a me experiencing something. So now, going back to that *sati paññā* — this awareness with intuitive intelligence.

So now, what is it that can pull itself out of these five aggregates? What is it that can make the five aggregates an object to be observed, to be felt, to be understood? So obviously that's something that cannot be within the five aggregates itself, because the five aggregates, all these qualities that we've talked about — sensations, feelings, perceptions, acts of cognition — are all very much dependent on each other. And yet here we are within ourselves observing this stuff, and that's what we're doing with meditation. We're pulling ourselves out of that process and we're actually seeing these things arising and passing away within this field of awareness.

Now although the Buddha uses these two words *sati* and *paññā*, really they're the two qualities of the very same faculty that we have. So we understand it if we say you look and then you see. So first of all something rustles or you see something passing, a bird of some sort — first you look and then you see what it is, a woodpecker. But without seeing, without looking, there's no seeing.

In our practice, we're pulling ourselves out to this objective position within ourselves — feeling, seeing, looking, observing, experiencing. And it's in keeping that inner eye still, the gaze, and allowing the seeing to come. And what we discover is that this is not within our control.

Here we have this body with its sensations, feelings and all that, which have become objects. As soon as they become an object, then obviously it can't be me. So you've dis-identified with it — that's the process of dis-identifying with it. And one of the things that you notice when you dis-identify is that they carry on without you. Feelings carry on whether you want them or not. Thoughts flash in the mind and take you away whether you want them or not. So that lack of control is also telling us that whatever it is, whatever this psychophysical organism is, it's not me. Scary stuff, by the way.

So then we have this *satipaññā* which is observing these things happening. Normally, our position is still with a sense of self, the observer. So what we've done is we've relocated this identity. So from a baby-like complete identity with the body, we identify with emotions. I feel upset. I am upset. I am depressed. So as soon as we say that, of course, you are. As soon as you say I am depressed, that's it. You're stuck. You're imprisoned. But as soon as you make the feelings of depression something objective, it's still not pleasant, but at least you're not that. You've found some other different location for this sense of self.

Same with thought. When you're thinking, more often than not, we're lost in it. I think, therefore I am. I'm not so sure he meant that, by the way, but even so. So then you pull yourself out of that and you find yourself relocated into this position of the observer, the objective observer. But there's still the sense of self. So all the time, just in this process of insight meditation, you're rediscovering a different centre, a different place where you get this sense of me.

And in that process, afterwards, after you've done it, at the end of a sitting, just ask yourself: what's it like being the observer? I mean, is that a better place than being an emotional self? Is that a better place than being a thought self? I mean, it's all right when the body, mind, and heart are working in perfect harmony and are jumping high in joy, peace, and all that, but that only happens occasionally. But this place, the observer — after you've come out of it, just reflect upon it. What's it like being in that location?

Now, where then does that sense of self arise when I'm in the position of the observer? So again, going back to that screen, going back to that television screen or computer screen. Sometimes when you're watching, you can see yourself, can't you, in the screen? See yourself watching TV, if the light's right. So that's it. That's the self. The sense of self is coming from a feeling of that *sati*, that awareness, that intuitive awareness within the mind. It's both a feeling, a feeling of a self, and a perception of a self. There's always those two. In Buddhist psychology, they always arise together, feeling and perception. You can't have one without the other.

Now, here's the interesting thing. How can we pull ourselves out of that? We've been able to objectify our bodies, our sensations. We've been able to objectify our emotions. We've been able to see images in the mind. I mean, it's difficult to see a thought, but you can. You have to just be a bit more concentrated. You see a thought coming up. We've been able to pull ourselves out of that, but if you try and pull yourself out of this more subtle self, you just create another self trying to pull yourself out of this self. It becomes a double take. It's a never-ending loop.

So how do we get out of that? So again, it's always this teaching about trying not to achieve anything. And when you're in a very good state of very clear meditation, when the body is absolutely still, when the heart's calm, when the mind is not thinking, very still, and there's only the breath — once in a blue moon, when you're there like that — really turn your attention on this feeling of a self for no other reason than to observe it, right? As soon as you try and get rid of it, you're in conflict. So just observe that thing, because that's also being created.

Now, that's why the Buddha says those who are aware are in the presence of *Nibbāna*. When you're in that state, you're very close to the experience of *Nibbāna*.

So what are the qualities of this Nibbanic experience? So in early Buddhism, I mean, the way the Buddha himself taught it, he taught it more from an experience point of view. What is the experience of *nibbāna*? And he's very clear about it. He's very clear about as to what it isn't, right? He talks about it as that which is not born, does not die, is not created, not compounded, not conditioned. That's pretty straightforward.

So it's not one of them.

But then he talks more positively and he talks about it as an *āyatana*. Now this word *āyatana* he uses as a sphere of experience. So we have six of these spheres of experience and they're dependent on the senses. And they are each of them unique, discrete unto themselves. So the eye can only see. It can't hear. It's another *āyatana*. It's another sphere of experience. And the sixth one is the mind itself.

Then he says that there is this *āyatana*, there is this sphere of experience where there's no sun, there's no moon, there's no coming, no going, etc. He's got a whole list of things, but it's not there. But there's definitely this sphere of experience.

And then finally, it comes up twice in the scriptures, he's quite clear that it is a consciousness. Because he uses the same word that he uses for these other experiences of just being aware in the world. And he is very clear. Again, he says there is a consciousness which is not coloured by any of the senses — and remember the mind is also a sense in Buddhism — and it has no boundary. Only phenomena create boundary. Walls create boundary. No boundary, and in all directions, full of light or awakeness, full of light.

So it's not as though there's often — how can we say — a very negative interpretation put onto his teaching and this *nibbāna* becomes more and more distant, more and more impossible to grasp. But when you actually pick out these little phrases from the scriptures, it's very concrete. There is a real experience of something within us which does not belong to this level of existence. And once that is attained, even if it's only a glimpse, there's a whole revolution in the way that we relate to the world because something has been deeply undercut, and that is identity.

The whole point of a Nibbanic experience is that there is that inner knowledge that one is not what one appears to be. And with that, of course, there's an ease of letting go. So we talked this morning about seeing impermanence is to be able to let go of things. You don't get caught up in it. You don't hold on to anything. And because there isn't this identity with the world, there's not a seeking of happiness in it. So we stop investing in it as a place for happiness because we've found a deeper happiness.

Now, does that mean that there are no more joys and no more pleasures in the world? Far from it. They still remain, but our relationship to them is radically changed, because we've found this — there's a deep happiness. Even if at first we can't attain that, at least we know it's there, just like a fully liberated person would always be in that state.

And the point of this is to understand that that's what we're developing through meditation when we talk about awareness. That's what we're actually developing all the time.

And as it develops, there's an ease with the way things are. See, that's the point. So it's not as though things have to get better. They can get worse, but there's an ease with it. You know, financial collapse, it doesn't mean that you don't do anything about it. We'll come to that in a minute. But there's not this tremendous

fear that arises. Fear is undercut, so always remember that our fears are the measure of our identity. And remember that this is all relocated in different areas of our lives. I mean Freud understood that well, so that all fear is actually the fear of death. It's the fear of ending, it's the fear of losing.

Now on the positive side, having now brought ourselves out of this enmeshment — they say bewilderment as it's called, bewitchment with the world — there's now a re-engagement. That's important. So at the end of every practice, there's always the *mettā*. And what the *mettā* does, what the practice of loving-kindness does, it forms a different relationship with the world. Not one based on me, not one based on selfishness. Definitely self-care — not to confuse selfishness with self-care — but a whole relationship change.

So there's an engagement in the world. And this is best mirrored in the actions of the Buddha himself. So once he understood what he'd got, his immediate thought was to teach it to somebody, to pass it on to somebody else. That's the compassion. That's that immediate movement of the Buddha within to the Buddhas that is within all of us. And although he has this doubt — that's put mythologically as a great god appears to him and encourages him to teach, because some people have only a little bit of dust in their eyes — that's a doubt that he probably had when he thought, well, would anybody actually understand this?

And it's interesting that he first tries to go to his early teachers. And of course they've died, they've passed on. And eventually he goes to his old five companions. And the one interesting thing when he meets his companions and he talks to them about this new understanding is that he has this little phrase keeps coming up: have you ever heard me speak like this before? Have you ever heard me speak like this before? And slowly but surely he gains that confidence in passing on his message.

So it's the same with us. The more we meditate, the more the purification, the more the insight, it comes out just in our very actions, just in the very way that we are. Whether we like it or not, we become teachers. We become exemplars. You should be very ashamed if you get drunk. You should put yourself in jail for three days. So if you say, well, I meditate, and then they find you on the street, all paralytic, they think, well, what's the point? So in a sense, also, we have to bear the burden of our responsibility.

Now just to explain — I don't have any more time — to try to understand this process of rebirth. So the process of rebirth is happening right here and now. Once we understand that, then the idea of it may be happening after death becomes at least more acceptable. It's not necessary to believe in any of this in order to become fully liberated for the actual Dharma to work, because the teaching is immediate. It either works now or it doesn't work. It's not something that you're preparing for the future. Meditation either works now, the practice works now, or it doesn't work at all.

Now if we go back to an original position that the Buddha states of our conditioning, it's this not knowing. It's a word that begins the process of dependent origination, which is describing the person in flow, in action. And there's not enough time to go into that too deeply, but this business of not knowing, what is it that doesn't know? So it is this *satipaññā*, it doesn't know and it arrives in this form at birth, it arrives

there in this form. So it's no wonder that it should then presume itself to be what it is experiencing, so that immediate identity with the physical form is natural to that consciousness, for want of a better word, to that *satipaññā*. I don't like to use the word consciousness, to the awareness, to that intuitive awareness — that's better. Or better still, the knowing. You'll find that in the literature too. And that's a very clever way of talking about it, because being a sort of verbal form, it gives the impression of it not being substantial, a thing. It's a process, a knowing.

So this knowing finds itself within this physical frame at a birth point and just presumes this is what I am. Now as soon as it's done that, it's seeking happiness within this form. And in seeking happiness within this form, it creates two attitudes. The first attitude is acquisitiveness, because the more you can have of a good thing, the happier you are. And the other one is the opposite: anybody who gets in the way must be hated and destroyed, annihilated, must completely get out of the way. So you've got your division immediately upon that wrong identity — one of acquisition which leads to greed and robbing and all that sort of stuff, and one which is getting rid of what is getting in the way which leads to murder, and if it's too big it leads the other way to fear, despair, suicide.

So either way, it immediately leads us into a position of conflict with the world. But because, generally speaking, most people find a sort of modicum of living which is at least fairly comfortable — I think I'm only talking about Westerners — we presume this is the way it should be, this is the way it is. So Freud, if you remember, came to the conclusion that there's no way you can get rid of unhappiness. You just get to this point where you're not utterly completely neurotic and you have a general feeling of well-being.

So this not knowing — and because it's an original not knowing, because it's an original state of not knowing — you'll see it translated as ignorance, which gives it the feel of culpability, you know, you should have known better. But it's not, it's just simply don't know. It's like when we have a real accident.

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