Not-self Revisited: The Story of Sati (MN 38)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 20:41

Greetings. I trust you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I hope it has been happy.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed noble and fully self-awakened one.

I wanted to just carry on with this not-self business, just to make it even clearer for those people who feel baffled by it. I have had some questions sent me. I hope the questioners will be patient enough to wait a couple of days, because tomorrow I want to actually go through the core discourse on not-self, which is the second one traditionally that he gave to his five companions.

So it's a case of recognising what the Buddha means when he talks about self. It's translating the word *atta* in Pali or the language of that time. And it's still there, of course, *atta* in Hinduism, the *atta* is your eternal soul, whatever.

So now is to do if we forget the word self for a minute and just talk about identity, identity. What do you identify with? Now, we have all sorts of identities. I'm a father, a son, husband, wife, brother, daughter, workmate, etc., etc. I also have social relationships, which I identify with. My job, I am a worker, I'm an office worker, etc., etc. But what we're talking about is your existential identity. What are you in the face of death? That's where the answer, that's what we're trying to discover or find out.

And there are two major opposite opinions. One is that I exist, meaning me, this that I think I am, exists after death in some way, and me, what I think I am, completely annihilates at death so there's your two opposites. Now in between that you might find people who say I am the body and also have some idea of afterlife.

I was with a friend down in Cornwall, he's died unfortunately. I used to go down there and spend some time with him and he was living with his mother and father, so we're talking about 10 years ago. We were having a discussion, we were sat on the couch, and his mother and father sat on these separate chairs, and of course the TV was on, and we were having a discussion about something. And his father was seemingly listening to what was on the television. Anyway, at some point in our supposedly private, quiet discussion, I said to him, well, we're not the body. And his father suddenly burst into this declaration, yes, we are! And it was such a loud snap that silence and embarrassment descended upon the four of us for a little while before we continued our discussion. So ironically, of course, he died that very year. I don't know what his last thoughts were.

So there are some people who believe in some way that they are the body. They are definitely the body. The most subtle one of course is that no I'm not the body that disappears in death I am my heart mind the old word for that is so as I work for it anima would be the Latin psyche would be the no psycho psychology and all that psyche would be the Greek for it so you have body heart and heart-mind, and then usually have spirit. And that's what most people think. Well, I'm not the body, I'm not the heart-mind with its emotions and thoughts. I am the one who knows. I am consciousness. So that's your more subtle position of those who think about afterlife.

Now the Buddha says, we're not any of that. See, that's the point. And to put it in his categories, he would talk about the five *khandhas*. So there's the body, that's the *rupa*. And the *nāma*, the mind, includes all your feelings, both physical, mental, pleasant, unpleasant, etc. All your perceptions, your thoughts, your images in the mind, which produces your imagination and thinking. And then you have this section of *san kāra*, which is translated as volitional formations, because this is where we create things, create with the will, volition. But I most prefer, just a very simple word, our habits. It's just the way we perform. And that's what we are, just a compendium of habits, just a group of habits.

And consciousness. Now consciousness, *viññana*, is variously used, so it's quite difficult to find out what this consciousness is when it comes to the *khandha* itself, the actual five heaps or aggregates that we're made of. But the one thing that points to what it is, is the point of contact. Now the point of contact, you must have an object which is coming into the mind. So you're looking at something like a tree. And there must be a sense base that is bringing the information in, which is the eye. And there's consciousness, which of course makes it bright and you become aware of it.

So consciousness, at the point of contact, is just a screen upon which the object and the sense base work to create something on a screen. That's all it is, a screen, something that allows something to appear.

The problem is that this consciousness is arising and passing away with every bit of information that comes in. And you could say bits, just like we say in computers, bits and megabytes and all that, these are bytes. These are just little, tiny little bytes that come in and the mind works on it and produces an image which then comes on the screen.

Now, the Buddha says we're not any of that. The Buddha says, well, not any of that. He says there is something within all that which is confused with it. And that's where the delusion lies. And at the most subtle point of delusion, it is the confusion of this awareness, this Buddha within, this intuitive awareness with that screen.

So that would be the same as, for instance, when we absorb into a film. So if you're in a cinema or watching it on a screen, you absorb into the film. And for a while you live in that imaginative world. And during that time, there's not you or the world or anything. You're completely absorbed. So generally speaking, we're absorbed in the world that is appearing on this screen.

So now, having said all that, if you think about these words that are used here, which sound very confusing. So things like the self exists for me. No self exists for me. So that means he doesn't identify with anything or put it this way. Nothing is it. Remember, self here means identity, permanent identity. So there's no permanent identity existing.

I perceive self with self. So I perceive that I am self-awareness and the body and mind. The two things that they perceive self, so they think both sides are self. And I perceive not self with the self is that the observer perceives is the only real, and the body and mind are what it experiences So the not-self here is the body and mind, the experience that we're having And the true self, the true identity, is with the observer

And then you have, I perceive self with not-self. So here, it's the perceived that is, the perceiver is not the self, but what is actually perceived. So that's this business of the consciousness being an emergent property.

And then finally, there's a full-blown sense of self. It is the self of mind that speaks and feels and experiences here and there, the result of good and bad actions. And this self of mine, this identity I have is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it endures as long as eternity. So that's obviously the self as agent, the feeler, everything you experience now, that's what you are, and that will last forever.

All that the Buddha said, and I love to repeat these things to myself, that is, this speculative view is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, the fetter of views. So fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. He is not freed from suffering, I say.

So I don't know whether that helps to clarify or makes things even more complicated. But I would love now to read the story of Sati. So this is the opening paragraphs of the Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving. That's what it's about. The *Mahātaṇhāsaṅkhaya Sutta*, and it's number 38 in the Majjhima Nikāya.

So this is the story of Sati. Thus have I heard, on one occasion, the Blessed One was living at Sāvatthi in Jeta's Grove. So remember, that's probably his most favorite monastery built by Anāthapiṇḍika, the businessman.

Now, on that occasion, a pernicious view had arisen in a bhikkhu called Sati, the son of a fisherman. Thus, as I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another. So he's saying that this consciousness is the consciousness, remember, not the body-mind. It's the consciousness that is the same from birth to birth. It just runs through all rebirths.

Now, several bhikkhus, having heard about this, went to the Bhikkhu Sati and asked him, "Friend, is it true that such a pernicious view has arisen?" "Exactly so, friends." That's funny. He seems to agree that it

is a pernicious view. "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is the same consciousness that runs and wanders through the rounds of rebirth and not another."

Then those bhikkhus, desiring to detach him from this pernicious view, pressed and questioned and cross-examined him. "Friend Sati, do not say so. Do not misrepresent the Blessed One. It is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One. The Blessed One would not speak thus. But in many discourses, the Blessed One states consciousness to be dependently arisen since without condition there is no origination of consciousness."

And although pressed and questioned and cross-examined by those bhikkhus in this way, the Bhikkhu Sati, son of a fisherman, still obstinately adhered to that pernicious view and continued to insist upon it.

Since the bhikkhus were unable to detach him from this pernicious view, they went to the Blessed One and after paying homage to him, they sat to one side and told him what had occurred, adding, "Venerable Sir, since we could not detach the Bhikkhu Sati, the son of a fisherman, from this pernicious view, we have reported this matter to the Blessed One."

Then the Blessed One addressed a certain bhikkhu thus, "Come bhikkhu, tell the Bhikkhu Sati, son of a fisherman, in my name, that the teacher calls him." "Yes, Venerable Sir," he replied. And he went to Bhikkhu Sati and told him, "Friend Sati, the teacher calls you." "Yes, friend," he replied, and he went to the Blessed One, and after paying homage to him, sat down at one side.

And the Blessed One then asked him, "Sati, is it true that the following pernicious view has arisen in you? As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is the same consciousness that runs and wanders through the rounds of rebirth and not another." "Exactly so, Venerable Sir, as I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is the same consciousness that runs and wanders through the rounds of rebirth and not another."

"What is that consciousness, Sati?" "Venerable Sir, it is that which speaks and feels and experiences here and now the result of good and bad actions."

"Misguided man! To whom have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in that way? Misguided man, in many discourses have I stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without condition there is no origination of consciousness. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured yourself and stored up much demerit, for this will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time."

Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus, "Bhikkhus, what do you think? Has this Bhikkhu Sati, son of a fisherman, kindled even a spark of wisdom in this Dhamma, in this discipline?" "How could he, Venerable Sir? No, Venerable Sir."

And this was said, Bhikkhu Sati, son of a fisherman, sat silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and

head down, glum and without response.

Then knowing this, the Blessed One said, "Misguided man, you will be recognised by your own pernicious view. I shall question the bhikkhus on this matter."

Then the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus, "Bhikkhus, do you understand the Dhamma taught by me that this bhikkhu, the son of a fisherman, does when he misrepresents us by his wrong grasp and injures himself and stores up such demerit?" "No, Venerable Sir, for in many discourses the Blessed One has stated consciousness to be dependently arisen since without condition there is no origination or arising of consciousness."

"Good bhikkhus, it is good that you understand the Dhamma taught by me thus, for in many discourses I have stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without condition there is no origination or arising of consciousness. But this Bhikkhu Sati, son of a fisherman, misrepresents us by his wrong grasp and injures himself and stores up much demerit, for this will lead to his harm and suffering for a long time."

Now, you have to have a certain sympathy for poor old Sati. I mean, he sat there, silent, sad, dismayed, shoulders drooping, head down, glum and without response. Well, you'd want to hug him, wouldn't you? Poor old Sati.

And it keeps going on about him being a son of a fisherman, but they all have that sort of name behind them. I put a little twist on it to suggest a bit of class prejudice, son of a fisherman. And that's, of course, how these stories grow. So the next one, it would be, if I were retelling this tale elsewhere, I'd say, but the son of a fisherman, something like that.

So you have to be careful with these stories that obviously played upon over generations, really. 500 years they were handed down from person to person. So they obviously changed. But I think we can take the root thing that there was a monk called Sati, who was the son of a fisherman, who got it wrong and made this mistake of thinking that the Buddha was talking about consciousness when he said that there was something eternal in us, something that doesn't die, etc.

And when you read the discourses like that, I have the patience to just read them through, then of course the core of the teaching keeps coming back at you. And the core of the teaching is obviously consciousness is dependently arisen since without condition, there is no arising or origination of consciousness. So that's telling us.

Now, unfortunately, then the Buddha goes on about consciousness and dependent origination and shows us how we can come to an end of craving. But he hasn't let go of Sati because right at the end of the discourse, the conclusion, "Bhikkhus, remember this deliverance through the destruction of craving," so he's been talking about how to destroy craving as taught in brief by me. "But this Bhikkhu Sati, son of a fisherman, is caught up in a vast net of craving and a trammel of craving."

Poor, poor Sati. He must have sat through all this. "That is what the Blessed One said, and the bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words."

So I think that gets the message home. Tomorrow what I mean to do is actually look at the core discourse or the main discourse on not-self, which is traditionally the second one that he gave to the five companions when they left, remember, and returned when he was fully awakened. So I'll be doing that.

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