Investigating Not-self: The Practice

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 23:39

Good evening.

I hope you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, but I hope it has been a happy day.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

These past few days we've been looking at *anattā* as an intellectual exercise really, just trying to understand it, trying to understand the way the Buddha expresses it in the scriptures. Hopefully that's become more clear—become more clear to me trying to teach it, frankly. But now we have to get down to the practice. So how do we actually investigate this in terms of our *vipassanā* practice?

Many of you who've worked with me will have heard me speak about it and explain it. So for you, it's a bit of a revision, you might say. But for those who haven't, it might offer you a technique, a way of investigating not-self.

There are three things. First of all, deconstruction—to deconstruct what we experience. The second one is control, seeing what control we have, what control we don't have. Remember that was one of the—in that second discourse on not-self, he starts off by saying, if this body were me, I'd be able to say, don't fall ill, et cetera, et cetera. And the third one is objectification—to turn everything into an object. If it's an object, it can't be me.

When we talk about deconstruction, we can take a very simple object. Everybody suffers from pain in the knee, usually, unless you're a yoga person. It took me years to be able to sit without any pain in my knees. So the pain comes. It draws your attention. And the first thing is your reaction, which is not to want the pain, the desire to move. So you have to wait for that to die away. Just recognise it. Desiring, desiring. Feel it. Feel the desire to move. It's all about feeling.

And then when that's passed and you find yourself equanimous, that's the time to start using the word pain. So we're using the word pain or discomfort, whatever. And we're not trying to get rid of pain or defeat pain—that's a no-no. And if the pain gets too much, well, you move. Make the intention to move and off you go. But let's say that the pain is bearable.

So you've got this pain, pain. And then what you have to do is deconstruct it, by which we mean you go into the pain. You try and see what it's actually made of. And when you get in there, you might find heat. You might find tightness. You might find pressure. You might find little bits of sparkly sensations. All sorts

of little things might happen. And your noting word might change. So you might be saying tight, heat, et cetera. And make that very clear to yourself by staying there and feeling it. It's not an intellectual process. You don't want to think about it. It's a direct experience of these sensations, which are the information coming to us, and then the mind does something with it.

Now, at the second level of perception, that's when the word pain comes up. And that's when you realise that pain is a mental construct. It doesn't actually exist. What exists are these sensations. Now, it's not as though you have to forget what pain is. You need to know when to go to the doctor. But there's that clarity now. That pain is basically a concept that we have about certain groups of sensations that arise from the body itself. So that's your sense base. Remember, the retina is for the eye. Sensations in the body are your felt, your sensation base.

So by deconstructing something, you're taking away its substance. And by doing that, you're realising there's actually not much there. And as you go into it, that detail, the quality of impermanence becomes much more obvious. So whatever is impermanent can't be substantial. It can't be a self. It can't be anything because as soon as it arises, it's virtually disappeared.

So by moving between those two perceptions, the perception of sensations, basic sensations coming in—heat, pressure, et cetera—and the concept of pain, we're also beginning to see how the mind builds up the world that we are living in. So remember, we're encased in this little bubble of consciousness. This is our world. And whenever in the scriptures the Buddha says, the end of the world, he doesn't mean the end of the cosmos. He means the end of the world that we constantly are creating.

So that's one way in which we can take away substance from things. And you can do the same with an emotion. So if you're isolating now and you're stuck in a room, et cetera, then say sometime in the evening you might feel lonely, might feel sad, et cetera. So if that negative state comes up, you don't think about it. You don't start indulging this business. If I'm unlovable, nobody loves me, everybody hates me. I've got no friends. But you go into the field, the field of loneliness. And as you take it apart, as you begin to look at it, just as sensation, it begins to lose that reality that we give it when we turn it into an emotion.

And it's at that point that we flip into this, I am lonely. So there's the identity. When it comes to the pain is I have a bad knee, there's your possession. So we're breaking up that mental process and recognising that the I is in a sense the last step in the process. The sense of identity is the last thing that happens in that process of perception.

The one example I use, which I know some of you know, is about ice cream. As soon as you see ice cream, then there's the memory of it. And there's that sense of like, so that's the *vedanā*, like it. So seeing it, it has to go through that process of recognising it as ice cream. And then there's the liking of it. Then there's the want of it. And then there's the I want. And as soon as the I comes in, it's very difficult to stop the empowerment. And that's the getting. So even though I say, I like, want, get ice cream, actually, psychologically, in Buddhist understanding, it's like, want, I, get, ice cream. That's the process. And it's

breaking that up that you realise that this identity is necessary. It's just something we put into that process.

You can always do this. You can start your meditation with this. If you find the mind's wandering, you can raise the interest and go through that little exercise.

Now, the second thing is this business of powerlessness. We haven't got entire control of the body. So obviously, pain in the knee is a case in point. You recognise that the pain has arisen, whether you want it to or not. It's not under your control. The control centre is elsewhere. It's in the body somewhere. It's in the brain, whatever you wish. And it's that disconnection with something that's happening that is disconnecting the I. So it's not all mine. It's not my pain. It's just the pain. And when you have something like loneliness or happiness, then it's not me who are happy. There is an emotion of happiness.

Now, in your noting, you can make that plain to yourself. There is pain. There is happiness. There is sadness. And just by objectifying it like that, you're undermining that sense of possession and identity. And when you step back into that position of the observer, the feeler, you can ask yourself, can the perceiver be the perceived?

Now that takes us on to the third point which is the objectivisation of our experience.

The two examples I use is first of all, when we were babies—we were all babies. And the second one is the myth of Narcissus.

Seemingly, when we're born and presumably in the later stages in the womb, for the first four months of our birth, everything we experience is just a shower. It's just a continual bombardment of sensations out of which we can make no sense. So there's light coming in, there's sounds coming in, there's sensations in the body, there's smells, there's tastes. And it's all one. It's not differentiated at all. That's what seems to happen. But of one thing, we're very sure whether something is pleasant or unpleasant. And when we are hungry, we definitely tell our mothers we're hungry. That undifferentiated catastrophe, you can say, of sensation for this poor little baby. No wonder it sleeps for 16, 18 hours a day or something.

Out of that, there looms, you might say, the first object. This is what psychologists tell you. And that object is usually your carer, your mother, usually. And very slowly over time, this differentiation occurs, helps to push the outer world outwards. And so the baby becomes to recognise that there's an outer world, although it might not be so much aware of the inner world, but it's definitely objectifying the outer world. And then there's also the attachment to the carer, to your mother. And so it seems that this business of detaching, pulling out in this too close a relationship with our parent begins to break apart. And there's all this terrible twos and all that. But by the age of three, we seem to be very clear. I'm me and everything else is not me. And that's taken three years. That's taken three years to push the outer world out into an object, into something that exists outside me, as different from me.

Now, if you think about it, that's all that's happening in our *vipassanā*. We are taking a position within

ourselves and pushing the inner world outwardly to observe it. And in so doing, we're reestablishing our identities. So sometimes we identify with the body, especially if it's a sharp pain like biting your tongue or when you're hungry or whatever. It's easier for us to identify with our emotions. I am sad. And then you pull yourself out of that identity. It's even easier to get lost in thought. You don't say I am thinking. You are thinking. You are the thinker. And you pull yourself out of that, out of the imaginative thinking, and you find yourself in this very strange position of being the inner observer, the inner feeler, the one who knows, the experiencer.

And when we've really got that position, everything is manifesting in front of us. And that's a point where we can also recognise that all this stuff is arising whether we want it to or not. And that again points to this business of control. And something you can do when you're in that position of the observer is reflect what's it like being just the observer. Because in the observer, there's no emotions, there's no thoughts, and there's no sensations. Keep working on that, because that identity is a fraction of the experience of *Nibbāna*. We'll come to that another time.

So we're into this objectivisation and I want to give you another image that you can work with and that's this myth of Narcissus. Now, remember, Narcissus looks into the pool, this very beautiful young man, and he falls in love with himself, with the image. And he goes to embrace himself and falls in and drowns. Now, in mythology, water is creation. Normally, it's often used for an image for creation. And Narcissus is sitting on the bank. And he looks onto the surface of the water, into the water, and he catches his own image.

Now, that's exactly what's happening with this *satipaṭṭhāna*, with this intuitive awareness, with the Buddha within. It looks into the mind, the heart-mind complex, the body-heart-mind complex, the psycho-physical organism. And what it sees is that surface consciousness upon which everything is rising. And it captures its own image. And that's the sense of the observer, the feeler, the experiencer, the sense of presence. In other words, that mirror, that surface is mirroring back to the awareness its own presence.

Now, what happens is you get lost, you dive into, you go into the world that the mind is creating on that very same surface. And that's what we're experiencing. That's the bubble of consciousness that is our world and it's specific. It's just our world. I can't know your world. I've got some idea of it, but I can't experience your world as your world. And so everything that I experience is very personal to me. It's very subjective. But I'm actually creating it. When I say I, I mean the body, the heart-mind—the psychophysical organism is creating the information. And what's happening is that this intuitive awareness is drowning in it. That's the delusion. It thinks that this is where true happiness is to be found. And it fails.

Our practice is to objectify all that, to see it right there in front of our inner eye, you could say, manifesting. And in so doing we're pulling out this quality of intuitive awareness. Now that's as far as we can go by our own practice and act of will. We can determine that. We can just push things away from us inwardly and make them an object. But you can't push that sense of the observer away. That just creates

another self trying to get rid of the observer.

So in a sense, you can do two things. You can either, as it were, from that position, just glance back. And what I mean by glancing back is the question, what's inside this observer? What's inside it? We know what's inside the body, the feelings, the sensations. We know what's inside the heart, the emotions, the moods. And we know what's inside the mind, thoughts, images. What's inside the observer? And that's one way of indicating that it's something which is of a completely different order. It doesn't belong to this psychophysical organism.

And the next thing is that you can turn your attention towards the sense of self of that observer—the sense of somebody observing and just keep your eye there, just wondering where is that being manufactured. And after that, really, you just have to wait until the insight arises.

And this is one way of investigating this whole teaching around not-self. So remember, the Buddha is not saying there's no self. He's saying that any self is manufactured. It's being constructed. And our whole purpose is to deconstruct that.

So remember, this is just one avenue of investigation. The other two avenues, which we'll hopefully come to later, because now we've got another three weeks of lockdown, would be understanding desire and looking more deeply at impermanence.

So just to recap there. When you've got your sitting posture correct and you're calm, you can do it with the breath or with a very loud sensation, the knee. It's often actually better with something louder and to actually go into it and deconstruct it. In the discourse on how to establish this awareness, the Buddha actually encourages us to do that. He says to feel feelings in feelings, to experience mental states in mental states. He's asking us to go into it and to deconstruct it. And one of my teachers was talking about plunging. You have to plunge into your experiences and deconstruct it, by which we mean find out what its constituents are.

And the second thing is to recognise that when we've discovered that position of the observer, this observation post, to see that everything's happening of its own accord. It's happening beyond our commanding. It's not within our personal power when we've taken that position. So sensations arise, feelings arise, et cetera, et cetera.

And the third thing is to recognise that everything we're looking at is an object, not me, not me, not mine, and not a self.

So I hope that's helpful. And you might have a go at it this evening's meditation. So it's just a way of practising. And then when we get into that steady position of just observing, just feeling, just experiencing just that, then you let go of all that and have this confidence, this real inner confidence, trust that this...

So I hope that is helpful. You might have a go at it in this evening's meditation. It's just a way of practicing.

And then, of course, when we get into that steady position of just observing, just feeling, experiencing just that, then you let go of all that and have this confidence, this real inner confidence, trust that this intuitive awareness can work it out for itself. It doesn't need us at all. It doesn't need this person talking and guiding it. Just watch. That's enough. Whatever draws the attention within that field of awareness—that's it.

Very good. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and not caused even greater confusion! So I think it's time that we can begin our meditation again. Very good.

Oh dear me, I've forgotten this little gadget again.

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