What Was the Buddha's Great Discovery?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:01

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

The question was: what was the Buddha's greatest discovery?

There are many people who follow Buddha Dhamma and receive tremendous benefit from the practice and the teachings, who are themselves some form of materialists, atheists, or scientific materialists. You can understand how they benefit from it, because you don't have to believe anything. That's the great thing about the Buddha Dhamma—you have to explore it yourself. But it does baffle me that some people deny the transcendence of Nibbāna or of the Buddha's achievement.

He himself referred to himself as the Tathāgata, which translates rather badly as "thus gone." But the best translation I've seen is "the transcendent one"—one who has transcended. What has he transcended? Well, he has transcended suffering. He has transcended saṃsāra. But I think it goes much deeper than that.

Involved in this is also perhaps a wrong understanding about the teaching of not-self. In the discourse on the teaching of not-self, he simply asks: if you look at your body, what can you control? We think we are the body. We think we are our emotions, but we find ourselves ruled by everything. There is very little I can do about the lack of hair on my head. It's a bit late anyway. Never mind.

And then there's all that business about impermanence, and if something is impermanent then obviously it cannot be substantial, and so on. I'm sure you all know that.

So what I want to do is look at his victory verse. This is what he says:

Through many births I wandered in saṃsāra, the world of suffering, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is repeated birth. Oh house builder, you are seen! You will not build this house for me again. All your rafters are broken. The ridge pole is shattered. My mind has attained the unconditioned—achieved the end of craving.

This house, of course, refers to himself—the heart, the psychophysical organism. Here he's using a metaphor for the self: the house builder. Through the house builder, we build this world that we're living in. This is our house.

When you think about it, everything is happening within your body, within the mind. And then we project

everything onto the world. It's sort of magical, really. We're in this bubble of consciousness, our own little bubble of consciousness. It's up to us to make it a fairly nice place to live. And we've made mistakes in the past, led by delusion, and made a hash of it to some extent or another.

What he's saying is that once he found the cause of this house that's built—which is the self, this delusive idea of a self—then he was able to escape all the suffering that delusion had made for him.

Now, this word citta: the problem for the Buddha was that he had discovered something for which the language couldn't express, and I'm not so sure any language can. But he was stuck with words that have other meanings. He talks about citta—citta means the mind, the heart-mind. It's the emotional and thought life, what we might understand by the Greek word psyche. But here it's obviously not that, because the psyche as we know it, the body-heart-mind complex, is conditioned. Yet he says he has attained the unconditioned citta. So he's pointing to something which is beyond our psychology and beyond our physicality.

He reinforces what produced that, which was, of course, the destruction of all the defilements. "My mind has attained the unconditioned." Unconditioned means—or rather, conditioned means—that whatever that is relies on something else for its being there. A tree relies on oxygen. So do we. We rely on food, on being gross physical beings. That's what conditioned actually means. And our minds are conditioned by society, by the things we put into ourselves.

So we're in constant interplay with our environment, which includes other people. But he says this is unconditioned—something that doesn't need anything else. And he calls it the citta, which in a sense gives it a certain substance. Now, he doesn't like doing that. It must have been a bit of a pain for him to say, because that's one reason he doesn't like the self.

This self is the atman of the Brahminical system, which referred to an eternal soul. There was huge confusion at that time as to exactly what it was. There were materialists who said that when you die, that's the end of it. So he was stuck for words, but he clearly states that whatever he experienced, once the house builder had been completely destroyed, was unconditioned.

By the way, Freud, with his insights, had a similar problem. He had to make up words—id, ego, superego.

Now, there's a very famous teacher some of you will know: Ajahn Mahabua. He died not so long ago and was understood to be an Arahant. He definitely said of himself that he no longer suffered. In one meditation—and I think this might have been the point of his release from suffering—he's in that place of just observing. And he says this Dharma, this teaching, arose in him spontaneously: "If there is a point or a center of a knower in meditation, anywhere, that is the agent of birth, the essence of continual becoming."

And that's exactly what the Buddha discovered himself. It's something that we also will discover in time: whenever the self arises, the world arises, and we go into that world which, unless we are completely purified of defilements, is a cause of suffering for us, a cause of unsatisfactoriness.

This isn't something ethereal. Every time we wake up in the morning, that process happens. You wake up and immediately recognize yourself. Many of you, I'm sure, have experienced waking up in a strange room—in a hotel or somewhere—and you don't know where you are. Just for that one moment there's this little frisson, this little burst of fright. You don't know who you are. And then suddenly it's you, and you feel safe again and happy. That moment is telling us that there is a point as we wake up in the morning where we take on this sense of self.

I just want to point out another way that he describes Nibbana. This comes from the inspired sayings, the Udana Sutta. It opens by saying that at one time the Buddha was staying at Savatthi, in Jeta's Grove at Anathapindika's monastery, and he was educating, encouraging, firing up, and inspiring the mendicants with a Dharma talk about extinguishment. What we have to be clear about is what is actually extinguished. These mendicants were paying attention, applying the mind, concentrating wholeheartedly, and actively listening.

Then, understanding this matter, on that occasion the Buddha expressed this heartfelt sentiment:

"There is, O mendicants, that dimension where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind." So there's none of the four basic elements. That means there's nothing physical. "No dimension of infinite space, no dimension of infinite consciousness, no dimension of nothingness, no dimension of neither perception nor non-perception."

Those are the four arupa jhanas, the non-material absorptions, which is the most refined state that the mind can get into—where there's nothing in the mind of the body at all, not even images of the body. So there's nothing from the physicality and there's nothing all the way through the mind.

"There is no this world, no other world, no moon, no sun." There's nothing there at all. "There, mendicants, I say, there is no coming, no going, or remaining, or passing away, or reappearing." So there's no time and there's no space. "Just this is the end of suffering."

And he uses the word "dimension." This is another way that he describes consciousness. Ayatana comes up in the dependent origination and is normally translated as the consciousnesses based on the sense bases. So you have eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, and so forth. And you have heart-mind consciousness. In the five khandhas, this consciousness is just a screen upon which information arises.

And that screen is dependent upon those six sense spaces. He's saying that there is a dimension that is beyond all of that. And he often refers to it as nibbana.

I'll leave you with a final one. We've just got a bit of time here. So again, the mendicants are paying attention. They're applying the mind, concentrating wholeheartedly, and actively listening. And this is probably the most famous statement, or the most well-known, shall we say:

There is that which is never born, never lived, was never created or bound by conditions. If there was not that which was never born, never lived, was never created or bound by conditions, there would be no escape from that which is ever born, ever lived, ever created and bound by conditions. But since there is that which is never born, never lived, never created or bound by conditions, there is an escape from that which is born, ever lived, ever created and bound by conditions.

And that's really his chosen way of expressing the transcendent—by telling you what it's not. And of course, it's up to us now in our meditation practice to turn our attention towards those three characteristics. Because that's where we will ourselves discover this dimension—to see impermanence, to really see it, and to see that there is a mechanism in us. This desire, which is born out of the self, is an expression of the self causing all these problems. And that sense of not me, not mine.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your diligent practice you will indeed break through the delusion and attain nibbana sooner rather than later.

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