The Nature of Nibbāna and the Path to Liberation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 16:41

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

This evening, the presentation is a little different because I've actually written something. So it's not going to be particularly verbatim, which is my normal way of presenting.

In the last two talks, we looked at, first of all, the Buddha's victory verse and his naming of the householder, which is to say that deluded self, which is Māra. When we talk about Māra, the evil tempter, that's the self, the deluded self. Then we went on - the next presentation was about a monk who wanted to know where all the world ended. And the Buddha tells him that this is badly phrased, that it should be where the world does not find a footing. And then he gives a very clear description of that place where the world does not find a footing. And this is it: There is a consciousness in which nothing is manifest. It has no boundary and is full of light in all directions. So we can understand this to be a description of *Nibbāna*.

Now our task is to find a way to practice in such a way that this might become manifest to us. But before we do that, I'd like to offer these metaphors, these ways of thinking about what we're doing so we can understand the process of liberating ourselves from self-deception, which is generated by this deluded self, this house builder.

Some of you have been to Satipañña to work with me and have heard all this before, but I'm hoping that you've forgotten it. And if you haven't forgotten it, you'll excuse my presentation because I just wanted it to be in this medium.

The first metaphor is to recognise what happens to us when we're babies. It has a similarity to the process of insight meditation. For the first four months of our lives, it seems, we're bombarded by sensual information and can make no head or tail of it. But we do know when we're experiencing what is pleasant or unpleasant. That is the dual world that we enter into. Then around four months, we start to delineate our first object out of this bewildering mass, and in so doing, we create the third dimension of depth. And it's usually out of this that we find our first object - our mother, our carer.

The process continues until around the age of three, when we're pretty clear that I'm not anything outside my body. My body and my sense of me are separate from everyone and everything. And I know my toys belong to me. They're mine. A very strong sense of possession. There's still a great connection to Mother,

but what we've done is we've distanced the outer world from the inner world.

Our practice is to distance this inner world from the intuitive awareness. Every time we experience a feeling or sensation, an emotion or mood, a thought or an image as an object, we're telling ourselves that this cannot be the awareness that knows it. The knower, the feeler, the experiencer experiences itself as quite other to everything it knows, feels and experiences.

That's what happens when we turn everything into an object. Just as the baby creates a third dimension by reaching out, and so creating distance, so we're pushing away what we are overwhelmed with - our sensations, feelings, and thoughts. And that distance between the object and the awareness is the inner third dimension.

The second metaphor that I like to use is one of Narcissus. As you remember, Narcissus was a handsome, beautiful young man. He looked into the pool, caught the image of his own face, fell in love with it, and then went to embrace it and fell in and drowned. This is understood as a myth about self-absorption, pride, vanity, conceit. Water in mythology often represents life and creation, as well as chaos and purification.

However, we can read this myth spiritually. It is that *sati*, the intuitive awareness - I notice, not AI - that catches its image on the screen of consciousness. Consciousness itself is that screen upon which the six senses manifest. That is why consciousness is defined by the sense base: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, mind consciousness and so on.

Every morning we wake up, the first thing we are aware of is ourselves, our self-awareness. I'm sure you'll have had the experience of waking up in an unfamiliar room at a hotel or friends. And for those first few seconds, you can't recognise where you are and so who you are. There's a momentary panic till we situate ourselves. So it is that *sati* sees itself, senses itself in the pool of the mind, the pool of the world that the mind is creating, and then we drown in it.

However, the Buddha has come to the rescue and offered us a methodology to resuscitate ourselves. We must drag Narcissus out of the water, sitting back on the bank of the pool. And so it is that in vipassanā, we draw our awareness out of the body and mind with its feelings, perceptions and habits, and we experience ourselves as the one who knows.

In this, our basic identity begins to change - where we base our identity. As children, our identity is very body-centred. We have that experience when we bite our tongues when we're eating. Just for that singular moment of the stabbing pain, we're absorbed into it and become a physical self. We then very quickly bounce out of it and are annoyed with ourselves and so become an emotional self. We then might reflect upon it and counsel ourselves to eat more slowly and mindfully, and so we become a thinking self. But this position of the observer, the feeler, transcends them all. It can be aware of all the experiences the body and heart-mind have.

Then we might acknowledge more and more clearly the distinction between the object and the subject. This takes us back to the distancing, the disidentifying process of the baby and young child. And this takes us a step further to investigate the nature of this identity of the self as the observer and the feeler. For having accessed within ourselves this inner position - called by Nyanaponika Thera in his classic work, still worthy of a read, The Heart of Buddhist Meditation, an observation post - from this observation post, we can see clearly that the body and heart-mind, the emotions and thought life, continue of themselves without the engagement of this self-awareness that we now experience ourselves to be.

Now we have a situation where the self-awareness sees the body as other and that the body keeps on being the body with its sensations and feelings. The emotions and moods still continue to arise and the thoughts and images continue to flit across the mind. None of it needing the direct control of *sati*, this intuitive awareness. So we're left with the question as to the nature of this self-awareness.

Our investigation now turns towards the self-awareness, that sense of presence. Since we're aware of it, that makes it an object. So we can't be it. Worse, we realise that this identity is the very portal into the world manufactured by the six senses, the five physical senses and the heart-mind. This is the face in the pool. Indeed, this primary self is Māra, the evil tempter, inviting us into the pleasures and joys of the world, only to find ourselves entangled, ensnared and imprisoned. This is the house builder the Buddha discovered to be the agent of rebirth, the root of all our discontent and suffering.

Now there's a practice which is pretty specific to this investigation. And I'm indebted - well, we are indebted - to the Mahāyāna school for this. When the body is very still and the heart calm and the mind is silent - now admittedly that's pretty rare in our daily lives, though it does arise on retreat - we can raise our attention into that feeling of presence located in the forehead. We can stay there to the exclusion of everything else and again just gaze.

We now know because we are aware of that sense of self, it is an object and therefore belongs to the mind. So it must be arising and passing away, even though it seems to be coexistent with the awareness that knows it. Remember, consciousnesses are flashing at enormous speeds so that they give us a sense of continuity. We need to hold that position as best we can without straining, just gazing with wonder. Is that sense of self arising and passing away? That is all. Just to gaze with wonder. Presume that the awareness knows what it's looking for.

The other technique is the one that we usually use when we're practising vipassanā. And that involves directly investigating the process of impermanence. Whenever we see an object, whether it's a sensation or a feeling, mood or emotion, thought or image appearing and disappearing, the same applies. The *sati*, this observer, this feeler, that experiences the object arising and passing away, cannot itself be arising and passing away. That gap, minute as it is, between the passing of an object and the arising of another, would also constitute a glimpse into our true nature, which is unborn, undying, uncreated and unconditioned.

We can sum up the techniques by first of all pulling away from the object we are aware of, so it becomes

something to observe and feel, remembering that the perceiver cannot be the perceived. This is the first step of not me, not mine, not self. Then, the direct experience of the appearance and disappearance of the object allows *sati* to experience itself as other, whole, entire and permanent. Slowly but surely, this intuitive awareness, *satipaññā*, becomes an island unto itself, impervious to the physical and mental worlds. This is where the very world cannot find a footing.

Fortunately, we have an example of someone who describes what it's like to be fully liberated from the delusion of self. This actually warrants a talk, but for our present purpose, it's enough to quote her. I'm presuming for the time being that you know the categories that the Buddha teaches: the four great elements, the six sense bases, and the five aggregates.

Mae Chi Kiao was an ordinary, barely educated village girl who died in 1991 at the age of 90. This is her statement: "Body, mind and essence are all distinct and separate realities. Absolutely everything is known. Earth, water, fire and wind. Body, feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. Sounds, sights, smells, tastes and touches and emotions. Anger, greed and delusion - all are known. I know them all as they exist in their own natural states. But no matter how much I'm exposed to them, I am unable to detect even an instant when they have any power over my heart. They arise and cease, they're forever changing, but the presence that knows them never changes for an instant. It is forever unborn and undying. This is the end of all suffering."

I can only hope my little homily has been of interest and that by your dedication to the practice you will be liberated from all suffering, like Mae Chi Kiao, sooner rather than later.

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