

Sati — Knowing

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 11:07

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā-Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato
Sammā-Sambuddhassa Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā-Sambuddhassa*

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I think if you were to choose one word which encapsulates the teaching of the Buddha when it comes to the practice as opposed to the theory, it would have to be this word *sati*. Its root in the Sanskrit means actual remembrance and it's used in that way with certain exercises, so we talk about *buddhānusati*, recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the qualities of the Buddha, qualities of the Dhamma, and even *maranasati*. But when it comes to the word *sati*, the Buddha is using it in a specific way.

With it he always puts the word *ariya*, which we translate as noble. It's probably more accurate to say correct, or that awareness that leads to liberation. And that's what he's really saying.

From his life story he happens upon it. The teaching of the time tended to be about developing mental states that we now call the absorptions or *jhānas*. Although they're very blissful states, and you find them in all religions because they're brought about by contemplations — this *mettā* practice that we're doing, if you do it very strongly, will create bliss within you — they also suffer from impermanence, so they didn't actually produce the answer he was looking for about human suffering. They still presented him with his existential angst.

Then he tried the self-mortification, if you remember, which is really the understanding that the body's at fault. Our appetites and greeds come from the body, and therefore you have to renounce the body to an extent that you almost kill it. He became very thin. And that didn't take him anywhere.

It was only when he had been revived by that rice pudding that he has this memory of childhood. He's watching his father doing the ploughing ceremony. In the scriptures it talks about the first absorption. But there's something else in that absorption which wasn't there before, and we call them *vipassanā* absorptions. That quality that was there, that wasn't in the practice that he'd been doing with these other teachers, was the intelligence.

So he's watching his father, absorbed in watching his father, but with that question mark in the mind. That's why I have that picture at the back given to me by an Irish student. The little girl is reaching out and pulling away a leaf to discover this beautiful butterfly, but you can see that she's coming from the position of don't know and it's quite frightening for her. When we open up to ourselves like this it can be a bit frightening, but the power behind it is this intelligence.

This intelligence, this knowing, is that within us which is to be liberated. Because the problem lies within the knowing itself. The knowing doesn't know where it's at and it makes a wrong decision, it makes a wrong association. If I were to choose one word for this *sati*, which is often translated as awareness, mindfulness and all that, for me the word that really encapsulates it is knowing.

We're rather lucky in English that we have this gerund, which is a verbal noun. In so doing, it doesn't coagulate into a thing. It's not the known. It's not our knowing. You take away its personality, its solidity. It's just knowing, just like being, becoming. That quality of just knowing what is happening liberates the knowing from delusion.

That intelligence, that internal intelligence we have, which is part of *sati*, the awareness — the awareness really is pointing to just that openness, the receptivity that you need. And that knowing is beyond our control. When insights come, even in ordinary daily life, it's not as though we've thought them through. Sometimes you go to bed with a problem and you wake up and it's as clear as day. And you haven't thought about it. So there's something about this intelligence within us which doesn't belong to the thinking mind.

That's why in the meditation we make such an effort to close the thinking mind. In so doing we liberate this intelligence. The awareness is the passive side of this intelligence — it's the openness, it's the receptivity. As we receive information there sparks forward out of it this grasping, this sudden understanding, and that's really the *paññā* part, this wisdom part within us. So *sati* is your default position.

In our standing meditation, just to come back to that bare awareness. Lovely word is stop. Just to catch the moment after you say stop. Before the mind rushes in for the next thing to do. It's just catching that moment and recognising that in that moment there's this tremendous potential because you're open to what there is.

Developing that awareness in his sitting, he was then able to let the heart and mind, all the conditioning that he had, just express itself. It was in that that he became aware of how we manufacture the world, where the actual original delusion lies. And it lies in the belief that we're human beings. Very simple. That we are this psychophysical organism.

Once we've made that delusive step, we're driven to make the best we can of this world, to seek happiness in sensual pleasure, in what the world can give us. It's not as though the world doesn't give us happiness or joy, but it can never totally satisfy this search, because the search is for something eternal, not dying, the immortal, the deathless, as he would put it.

Trying to find that deathless Dhamma, the *amatadhamma*. We say it when we repeat these phrases: the unborn, the undying, the uncreated, the unconditioned. What is that? Where do we find that position within the world of creation, within the world of transient things?

That's the process of *vipassanā*. Every time we make something an object within us — be it a thought, an emotion, a feeling, a sensation — in order to do that we've stepped out of creation, we've stepped out of the conditioned and we're discovering this place within us which is the unconditioned. In so doing, we're discovering the real, true, deeper meaning of *sammāsati*, this noble awareness. That's our Buddha nature.

Once we become certain about that, once we begin to understand that, then the training begins. Because we're constantly drawn back into the old conditioning. And that's the problem. The old conditioning is heavy. It'll keep sucking us back in. But every time we come back to that position of just awareness, bare attentiveness, pure knowing, we keep reinforcing within ourselves where the object of our quest lies.

That's why this practice of *vipassanā* is fundamental to the spiritual life really, because it's so easy to get lost in daily life. But just to settle in the morning, a little bit in the evening, and as many small times as we can during the day, to re-establish just that position of pure knowing. Just coming back down into that default position.

We did it in the standing meditation. Just to stop. And then you act from that position of awareness to the next thing to be done. It's that practice of constantly stopping and coming back down to that pure awareness which is the practice.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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