Awareness at Work and Right View, Right Attitude

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 21:15

Greetings, good evening. I hope you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, although I wish it had been happy for you.

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

This evening, I want to start with a practical question that's come through. It's from Danny.

"I have a technical job assembling electromechanical units. This involves reading a drawing, collating the parts, and getting the parts to fit together. I try to maintain a degree of mindfulness, but with all the movements associated with these activities, it becomes exhausting. Instead, I note walking from A to B and standing, but I spend more time at the bench. I have tried to note looking and seeing during these times, and even with this, I'm aware of other actions too, and then note that I'm ignoring these objects to force my attention on the seeing. This can be followed by frustration, again, noted. My formal practice is one of slow noting, even though, for example, when I raise my heel, I'm aware of the other touch sensations, but do not note them as independent sensations. My question then is, how to maintain mindfulness at work when I'm involved in an activity that needs to be done with relative speed."

Now, this is a regular question that comes from people who practice the Mahāsi technique. The Mahāsi technique is a very specific technique for a particular type of situation: the retreat. The whole idea, of course, is to slow everything down. The noting is a way of stopping the mind from wandering. It has this other purpose, which is to turn everything into an object. You're pointing at something all the time. But in terms of this question, the retreat or the Mahāsi technique is about slowing everything down and noting, especially intentions, and becoming more and more refined in order to see how the mind is creating the world that we're experiencing.

When you go out into daily life, I didn't have this trouble because I had started with Zen and I practised up at Thrustle Hole in Northumberland. There we did things at speed. I mean, really fast, and for long times—an hour, two hours even sometimes. I remember one time, for instance, I was given the job of the dining room, and part of it was polishing the chairs. I had to polish the chairs as if they'd never been polished. You did it at great speed. The understanding is, of course, that the faster you go, the more you've got to keep your mindfulness. Your attention is right there. If your attention wanders, then you'll drop

something, you'll trip up, you'll make a mistake. It's not as though mindfulness stops you making mistakes as such, because accidents happen.

So I never had this problem of transferring noting into daily life because, frankly, I never did it. Because of my Zen training, I knew that what I had to do was just put my attention on what I was doing.

When you are doing something, especially something that demands attention—careful attention, such as the work that Danny does—then, of course, noting can get in the way because your whole attention is towards the object. Those of you who've been here know that when I talk about meditation at work, doing the chores in the morning, then yes, the idea is to be with what you're doing.

Sometimes there's a confusion about self-awareness, that you have to be aware of yourself all the time doing something. But that's, of course, a split consciousness in the sense that one minute you're aware of yourself and one minute you're aware of what you're doing. So that's not where we want to end up. Self-awareness arises quite naturally. You can't get rid of it by creating another self. It just creates confusion. But as you keep paying attention to what you're doing, then there are moments of absorption.

This happens to us quite easily when we're watching something exciting like a film. You absorb into the film. You disappear for a couple of hours. When you come out, you say, "Oh, that's a good film." It's the same with hobbies. When we're really interested in what we're doing—gardening or something—time can just fly by. That's when we lose that sense of self, somebody doing something, and with it, of course, a sense of time. It always happens at the computer a lot and other ways like Facebook and all that.

When we're at work, our effort, of course, is to be attentive to what we're doing. Now it might be that some noting helps us just to pay attention to that, but we don't want it to get in the way. We want to pay attention to such a point that I'm just being my doing. That's the trick of it, you see. So it's not a case of being self-aware of what you're doing. It's not a case of being aware of everything else around what you're doing. It's a case of one-pointed concentration work that you're supposed to be attending to.

So it's not a case of noting everything specifically. At times you can just drop that. When you know that your attention is steady, when you can trust it to remain with what you're doing, then you've arrived. That's it.

When you go into an absorption where you lose that sense of self and you're just doing, of course, how you enter into it is the mental state that you'll be developing. So if you go into it with a calmness, a sense of just doing, a sense of equanimity or whatever, or even a sense of kindness—I mean, that's more easy if you're tending to people rather than a machine—or with a machine, it'd be more carefulness, being caring.

It makes everything easy if you can bring your heart into it, give it a good reason for doing what you're doing. If you go into it with care and attention, affectionate awareness, then you come out with more of that because you're developing it. If you go in there with a sense of rush, then, of course, you're

reinforcing that attitude and you come out with more rush. That can lead to an early exhaustion.

I'm presuming that what Danny's saying here is that trying to note and do the work, he's found exhausting, and rightly so. So the thing to do is to do the work. If the mind's very jittery, it's going all over the place, then yes, keep noting a little bit just to put your attention there. But as soon as you feel that you're holding your attention, and that you're involved, let go of it. Just be aware—it's enough.

If that didn't answer the question, especially Dan, if it didn't answer the question, just send me another email. Do feel free to send questions about your meditation practice and so on.

I'm finally arriving at the question: are all the stages of the Eightfold Path equally important?

The short answer is yes, but some precede the others. So they have preference in sense of preceding the others. But eventually they're all important in our practice.

The first thing is to be clear as to what the Eightfold Path is actually referring to here. Remember, we've got right view, right understanding, which is followed by right attitude, right intention. Then you have right speech, you have right action, right livelihood. Then you have right effort, right awareness, and right concentration.

Interestingly enough, when you actually talk about this as a practice, you start off with *sīla*, you start off with morality, which is right speech, right action, right livelihood. Then you talk about the meditation. Then finally, you talk about the wisdom, the right view and right attitude. But when you're actually talking about it as a logical process, as to how it actually knits all together, then you talk about it in this eightfold way.

I'm going to follow just the eightfold path, not the teaching way of *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*, which is morality, concentration or attentiveness, and wisdom.

When the Buddha talks about *sammā diṭṭhi*, right view, right understanding, he's basically referring to the Four Noble Truths as the basic, as the base of our understanding. From a practical point of view, from our practice point of view, in terms of *vipassanā*, it really is relating to those three characteristics of existence: that the cause of suffering is desire, that everything changes, nothing actually changes into something else. Everything is quite spare, quite distinct, and there's this constant impermanence going on, and that everything is not self. From a human point of view, everything is not self. Everything isn't substantial. Nothing can exist on its own. It's always in relationship, in dependency on something.

Obviously the body's dependent on the air that we breathe and so on. The heart dependent on relationships and the mind dependent on information. So everything has something to feed. It's got to be fed. It's got to be related to.

But the interesting thing is this *sammā diṭṭhi*, this right view, is really about conceptual thinking. If you think about it, everything that we experience during the day, everything we look at, we hear, et cetera, et

cetera, it's always fitting it into a particular concept. This process actually has a word in psychology: apperception. So you see something and you've not seen it before. When you look at it closely, and get closer, "Oh, yeah, well, that must be a type of fly." Or if you taste something which you haven't tasted before, it's, "Oh, well, this must be a type of Chinese dish."

So you're always fitting it in to your preconceived concepts, your preconceived ideas, which have been built up ever since we were born. A lot of them are subconscious—we're not fully aware of these concepts that we are always looking at the world through. The obvious ones, things like freedom. What do we mean by freedom? I remember a few years ago now, there was this whole thing about the right to insult, which is a very aggressive way of saying you can say things which might upset others, but the way it came across was that you had to go and punch somebody with your new ideas or with your view.

So this whole idea of free speech, the whole idea of personal liberty, the whole idea of democracy, parliamentary democracy—all these are great big concepts which manifest our relationship to the world we find ourselves in. There's the negative ones—there's all the prejudices, sexism, racism, ageism. Now I'm very much aware of ageism these days.

So you can see the way we look at the world is always coming from some preconceived ideas. What the Buddha says is that unless we can really correct these ideas, unless we can correct these perceptions, these conceptions, then we're just not going to get out of the mess we're in. That's why he's always keen to deconstruct what we experience and to begin to investigate what we experience.

So the main one is, of course, the one that we directly experience virtually all the time is this relationship we have to pleasure and pain, pleasant and unpleasant. What he's saying is, if you remember from the beginning of the discourse last night, it's neither indulging nor is it being averse to something. So we're trying to lift ourselves out of this reactivity, which comes from a fundamental misunderstanding somewhere as to where we can find happiness. That's where the base of it is.

We all want to be happy. We're all chasing happiness. We've all got our own definition of happiness. It's all coming from this wrong understanding as to where we can find true happiness, or true well-being or true ease with living. An accommodation with life, which no longer is painful for us.

So *sammā diṭṭhi* is that. Included in that would be the very important teaching about *kamma*, the fact that when we act there are consequences. That's a real experience, a real understanding. I mean, there were teachers at the time of the Buddha who said that there was no—there was one especially, Pūraṇa Kassapa I think his name was—who said it didn't matter if you went down one side of the Ganges, full of compassionate act and generosity, and at the other side full of murder and thieving, it wouldn't make a difference at all. It had no consequence.

So there were all these peculiar ideas going around at the time, and the Buddha was clear about action and consequence of action, and that the action had to have some awareness of what you were doing. So

killing something by accident—I remember when I was at Gaia House, I'd be walking in the dark and I could hear this crunch and it'd be a snail I just stood on. Obviously I didn't mean to do it. I've got that natural regard for snails. That wouldn't be considered to have bad *kamma*, except that, of course, one feels guilty anyway, one feels bad anyway. But that's not necessary because there wasn't the intention there.

So the whole teaching about *kamma*, it comes into this right understanding.

When we've got this right understanding, as I say, that comes first. It begins with what we hear, what we're told, what we receive. Then, as it were, it becomes our own personal knowledge, our own personal understanding when we think about it. Often, I'm sure you've found that you've understood something, but when you've tried to explain it to somebody else, you can't do it. So that's the same with this growth of understanding. The first is through your reading, through your listening, et cetera, information comes in, and then somehow you've got to think about it. You've got to activate it within yourself, and then it becomes your own property. Then, of course, it has to be reinforced by direct experience, and that's *vipass anā*, *vipassanā ñāṇa*, knowing by way of direct experience. That's when it becomes your own personal experience. Then you find it has this flowing through the rest of the path.

The next thing, of course, is that it changes your attitude. It changes what you intend. Some people translate it as thought, which I can understand, but I don't think it's quite right. I don't quite get across the meaning of *sammā saṅkappa*. Because when that's described, it's described as moving away from greed and selfishness towards generosity. It's a process of renunciation, renouncing that wrong desire. So moving from greed towards generosity. It's described as moving away from hatred and aversion towards love and acceptance. It's described as moving away from harmfulness, from cruelty, from one-upmanship and all that stuff towards compassion.

So these are attitudes. It's out of these attitudes that these intentions begin to manifest in a given circumstance. From then, of course, you're into right thinking in your mind, which is speech. I mean, you're talking to yourself. Then it goes into right speech, right action, right livelihood. All this is supported by your meditation.

We'll say a bit more about the right speech, right action and all that, and especially right livelihood, tomorrow evening.

So the short answer is that all these sections in the Eightfold Path are equally important, but some precede another. Of course, right understanding precedes them all. It then has the effect upon your attitudes and then the rest flows naturally depending on the circumstance. So sometimes you're talking, sometimes you're doing something, sometimes you're at work.

If any questions arise about that, do send me an email. So I shall leave it there for this evening so that we can get back.

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