

# What Was the Buddha's Great Discovery?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 15:01

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

So the question was, what was the Buddha's greatest discovery?

There are lots of people who follow Buddha Dhamma, they get a lot from the practice and the teachings, who themselves are some form of materialists, atheists, scientific materialists and so on. You can understand how they get the 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's he transcended? Well, he's transcended suffering. He's transcended *saṃsāra*. But I think it goes much deeper than that.

Involved in that 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're our emotions, but we find ourselves ruled by everything. And there's very little I can do about the lack of hair on my head. It's a bit late anyway.

And then there's all that business about impermanence, and if something is impermanent then obviously it can't be substantial and so on and so forth. I'm sure you all know that. So what I want to do is take his victory verse — so that's the first thing we'll look at — and 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. *Citta*."

He uses the word *citta*. We'll come back to that.

"And I have reached the end of craving."

So here he's using a metaphor for the self — the house builder. And 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. I mean, it's magical, really. So

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

So what he's saying is that once he's 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 that delusion 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's stuck with words that have other meanings. So he'll talk about the *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.

But he says he's attained the unconditioned *citta*. So he's pointing to something which is beyond our psychology and beyond our physicality. And he reinforces what produced that, which was, of course, the destruction of all the defilements. "My mind has attained the unconditioned." Unconditioned means that — 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. So that's what conditioned actually means. And our minds are conditioned by the society, 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. So it's 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. So it must have been a bit of a pain for him to say that, because that's one reason he doesn't like the self. So this self is the *ātman* of the Hindu system — well, the Brahminical system — which referred to an eternal soul. And there was huge confusion at that time as to exactly what it was. And there were materialists that said when you die, that's the end of it.

So he's stuck for words, but he clearly states that whatever he's 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, didn't he? Id, ego, superego.

Now, there's a very famous teacher — some of you will know him, I think — Ajahn Mahābua. He died not so long ago. And he was understood to be an *Arahant*. He definitely said of himself that he no longer suffered. Now, in one meditation, and I think this might have been the point of his release from suffering, he's in meditation and he's in that place of just observing, et cetera, et cetera. And he says this Dhamma, this teaching arose in him spontaneously. And this is it:

"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. So it's something that we also will discover in time: that 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 — unsatisfactoriness.

Now, this isn't something that is ethereal. Every time we wake up in the morning, that process happens. You wake up and you immediately recognise yourself. And 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.

So 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 *Nibbāna*. And this comes from the inspired sayings. There's a collection of his inspired sayings, the *Udāna* Sutta. So it opens: it just says that at one time the Buddha was staying there, Sāvatti, in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery, and he was educating, encouraging, firing up and inspiring the mendicants with the Dhamma talk about — now this is the word — extinguishment. But what we have to be clear about is what is actually extinguished.

And 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 — what we call *arūpa jhāna*, the four absorptions, 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 not even that. 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."

So 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.

"This is just the end of suffering."

And he uses the word dimension. So this is another way that he describes consciousness. *Āyatana* — it comes up in the dependent origination and it's normally translated as the consciousnesses are based on the sense bases. So you have eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, etc. And you have heart-mind consciousness. And 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 that. And he often refers to it as *Nibbāna*.

And 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, they have not caused confusion, and that by your diligent practice you will indeed break through the delusion and attain *Nibbāna* sooner rather than later.

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