# The Basics of Insight Meditation 02

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 34:16

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambhodassa* — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed noble and fully self-awakened one.

So if you can imagine what it was like for the Buddha to leave his family. He's twenty-nine, he's married and he's just had a child born. It's not as though he made a sudden decision, he's off. It must have been hanging around for quite some time, and I often wonder whether his marriage was in good faith or bad faith according to the philosopher Sartre — just to follow customs and not to follow what your heart's really telling you. I'm wondering whether the birth of his child was like a crisis point where he realised he wasn't ready to be a father or whatever. Obviously during that late youth, around about twenty-five onwards, there is usually an awakening to the fact that youth is passing, and for some people it can be like an early midlife crisis. So he leaves anyway.

I can't imagine he was happy about leaving, but determined to do so, perhaps just to taste the life of the *sa mana*, the recluse, the wandering recluse. And then what drives him is, of course, this urge to try and get beyond suffering. So that was the big theme of the age. Everybody was concerned about bringing suffering to an end. Some thought well, if you practise the *jhānas*, these absorptions, that's where you ended up forever in these heavens. Others were materialists, and when you're materialist, they just said well, when you die you die.

So he goes in search of teachers and he probably already knows them because one of the entertainments of the age was to go out into the park at full moon — and the full moon in the east is really almost like the sun coming out — and to listen to these debates where these religious leaders would try to better each other. So he was well into it, and we know that because after he becomes liberated he's able to hold his own with his arguments and understandings. So he's well into the whole spiritual religious turmoil that was part of that time. It was the same time that the Jain leader was there and all the Upanishads, the Hindu scriptures, began to appear. So it's an age of awakening — I was going to say a bit like ours, but I'm not sure about that.

He tries, of course, these various teachers, and the first two tell him how to get into these blissful states. In both cases he's good enough to become a teacher in that tradition, and in both cases he leaves because when he comes out of those states he's back to being anxious, depressed, etcetera. So they've not answered his fundamental urge within him to find if there's an end to suffering, which I think for him would have been the end of rebirths. It's there in the scriptures — he often talks about "this is the end of becoming," and right now you have to underline that as the end of becoming as a self.

So then he tries this other form, this very hard ascetic practice, with the understanding which I think was a Jain understanding. There's some hint that he was following that practice, that the soul, the eternal soul, was trapped in the body and that the body was a manifestation of your bad *kamma*. So if you didn't have eyes, you wouldn't have lust. If you didn't have a tongue, you wouldn't have greed. So the idea was to draw the body down, and that was done mainly through fasting. He got so thin, he said he could hold his spine through his stomach. If you try that, you'll see he was very thin.

At some point, if you can imagine it, he's there with six companions who probably have been with him all that time, so they're close mates, spiritual companions, all urging each other to be more and more ascetic. At some point he realises he's not getting anywhere — he's just more suffering, he says — and he leaves. I'm sure that in all our lives we've taken up something and then realise it's not working for us and we're going to start again. We've got to go somewhere else, got to find another way of spending life. So I can only imagine that he's pretty depressed in our terms.

We have one biographical — well no, it's not the only one. There are two fairly acceptable biographical points in his life that we know about. There's something in his early life which I'll come to, and there's this point where he's sitting on a road and a woman with offerings for the local god offers him a mince pie. It revives him and it makes him consider what he's doing, and that's when some determination takes him to have one more go. It comes from this memory which is understood to be a real true biographical moment where he remembers watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. He remembers himself being concentrated and full of enquiry, full of a sense of curiosity.

I think that means that his whole approach completely turned around on itself. Instead of trying to get rid of suffering, he now turns towards it to find out what the cause of it is. He finds himself a nice place near modern day Bodh Gaya and there's a village close by where he can get some food. He sits and he becomes liberated from suffering in his own terms. Such is his demeanour that when he turns up again to see his friends — because he thinks well, who can I teach? At first he has that doubt about whether it's worth doing it — but then when he approaches his people, they first of all turn off. They think he's gone soft, they don't want to know him. But as he approaches them, they begin to see that there's something about him which has changed.

In the conversation that follows, which is in the Vinaya rather than in the scriptures, he's constantly asking them, "Have you ever heard me speak like this before?" So he's made a real profound breakthrough and he's trying to get it across to them. That breakthrough goes back to that childhood way of looking at things.

So when we're born, we've already got it. It's there at birth, this ability to just receive. It is said that during the first four months it's just a catastrophe of information. We're seeing things, we're hearing things, and it's just coming at us. There's no objectivity where we're absorbed in the process, and that little baby knows very clearly what's pleasant and unpleasant. So you're born directly into that duality.

Then it would seem after four months you begin to push the world outwards, and the first object tends to be your carer, your mother. So eventually what was right here, happening here, becomes out there. Pushing it out there becomes an object outside, and we forget that everything we're observing and seeing is actually being put out onto the world out there. What we're seeing is what the mind is creating at this present time.

That sense of awareness that he found, that intuitive awareness that he discovered by just relaxing within himself and observing, he picked up from that experience he had watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. That's probably, I would have thought, around about the age of seven and eight, because that's when we become a bit more self-aware in that way. For instance, guilt comes into play around about the age of seven, and around about the age of seven we drop the idea that what we can see or what we can imagine has to be real. So Father Christmas can't come down the chimney anymore.

This awareness that he then isolates from everything else that's in the body — all the senses, the consciousnesses that arise dependent on the senses — is that whole process. That whole process of investigation is the process of liberation. That's what he discovered. That's what he's trying to tell us to do.

This word *vipassanā*, which just means to see clearly, to really look and see — he's very clear on what it is that we're trying to investigate. It's not amorphous, it's not some fuzzy idea. He says, "Have a look at desire, this process of desire." He gives us three models of a human being — actually there's another one too, but the three main ones are the five *khandhas*, whereby he deconstructs the human being as a cross-section. So there's your physicality, and then your mentality is made up of your feelings, your perceptions, all your habits which are made by us through acts of will — that's the important thing, they're conditioned and conditioning — and consciousness, which here means a screen upon which all the information lands.

Then he points out that the consciousness is dependent on the six sense bases. There's the five obvious ones, which are your five physical bases — your eye, ear, nose, etcetera — and the mind itself, which is sensing your emotions and your thoughts. Then the final one, which again is more like a cross-section, and then he gives us a process which is dependent origination.

He starts off with that sense of ignorance, and this ignorance isn't culpable. It's not as though that four-month-old baby should have known better. It's just that's what happens to us. We come in not knowing — that's the word, not knowing. Then we manufacture some idea of ourselves, a sense of me, which concretises around about the age of three, so that you have a very little individual boy and an individual girl.

That's necessary. We have to start off with a self. It has to be a stable sense of self, a good sense of self. Often in the scriptures, and especially in the Dhammapada, there's a whole section on being a good self. But once you've established it, once it's stabilised, then we've got to get — it's not that you get rid of it completely, it's just that you recognise that it's also creating a wrong relationship of identity.

Every time we come into the *vipassanā* we've moved our identity. So we have a physical identity sometimes, like when you bite your tongue when you're eating. Just for that one moment, you and that excruciating pain are one. Then you get angry with yourself and then you become an emotion. Then you might reflect upon why it happened and then you become your thought processes, and so on and so forth.

Here in the *vipassanā* we've accessed some place within us, this observer, this feeler, which also has a sense of self. That's the one that has to be cracked. That's the last sense of self that has to be undone, you might say.

In the discourse on not-self, which is the second discourse that he gives according to the tradition — so the first one is just laying out the teaching which eventually formalises into the four noble truths, and one person listening to that, one of his six companions, becomes what we call a stream-enterer. He makes a breakthrough through that delusive idea of self. Then they all go off, seemingly they all go off to get some food and they come back and have a bit of a lunch, have a rest, cup of tea, and then he gives his second talk centring on this *anattā*, not-self.

It begins by saying, "If I were the body, I could make it different. If the hair on my head was mine, I'd make it grow, but it disappeared completely — what to do? If this body and if these emotions were mine, I'd have total control over them, but obviously we don't have that sort of control." If the sensations in my body were under my control, I'd be able to do something. Now it's not as though we don't have some control, but it's very surface. Even if you think about your body, have we any idea at this moment what the spleen is doing? I'm not so sure I even know what a spleen is. All I know is you don't want to get rid of it, or try not to get rid of it.

Then he talks about impermanence and he says, "If it's impermanent, how can it be me?" So he's struggling with this word *atta*. This was the word which was being used for an eternal self — it's the same word *ātman* in Sanskrit. So it's used by the Hindus, or the Brahmins — it's not Hinduism as such yet, it's Brahmanism we call it. It's used by other teachers such as the Jain teacher to point to something which is not part of this psychophysical world, psychophysical material world.

The discourse is not saying we don't have a self — remember, it does get confusing here. What the discourse is, is a pointer which is saying, "Look, if there is this self, where is it? What is it?" The next point he comes to is impermanent. He says, "Well, if this self is meant to be an eternal soul, an eternal spirit in our language, if it's so, it can't arise and pass away."

So even by investigating everything that we're experiencing as momentary experiences, we're beginning to understand that anything I experience can't be me. It can't be this soul. It can't be this permanent sense of self. Even the sense of self disappears when we sleep, so I can't be that either.

So it was really trying to point people to really investigate whether there was this eternal soul, and it was this process of investigation which is the liberating factor. So this is the path, you might say. The specific

path of the Buddha was the process of investigation.

Then of course he says if something arises and passes away and you're clinging on to it, then it's going to cause suffering. That's the *dukkha*. Later, in a later way of explaining that, he talks about the three types of suffering. So there's the suffering of reactivity, *dukkha-dukkha*. Life has suffering whether we like it or not, but how we relate to that, the unpleasantness of life, that also causes suffering.

Everything is suffering if we're attached to something, and we get attached to what is pleasant, to what is beautiful. The impermanence of that — catching the impermanence, that we can let go, we accept beauty. So the thing is, it's accepting and enjoying beauty, enjoying that aesthetic mental state. When it goes, to remind ourselves it's gone — that will never repeat itself. I'll get something like it, but I'm chasing the dragon. It's the same psychology as any drug addict.

Then finally the *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, the *dukkha*, the suffering or the unsatisfaction that comes by not seeing that everything's compounded. There's nothing that has any solidity, that has any substance. We know that on a physical level from our science. Somebody once said to me if we took all the space out of the body, we'd end up with something like a centimetre cube of matter. So that's what we're made of, these subatomic energies, whatever. It's magic when you think about it.

So it's investigating these three characteristics that lead us to discover within ourselves something which is not part of that process. He doesn't like to name it. He doesn't like to call it something. He prefers to talk about the experience — *Nibbāna*. What he says about *Nibbāna* is that there's nothing in it which you've ever experienced or can experience. It is beyond the body and mind and heart. It's beyond all, whatever we call being a human being — it's not that.

Then in another scripture where he's in a sense pushed, we might say, by the question to answer in a very direct way — it's called the Kevaddha — it's very famous amongst monastics, amongst certain monastics, because...

it goes against the idea that Nibbāna is nothing, like it's a sort of clever way of talking about annihilation. And there's this monk Kevada and he wants to know where the world comes to an end. Now the world in this sense, and the Buddha often uses it in this sense, is the world you're experiencing. It's your world, right? It's not the world as an objective thing.

And he goes and asks somebody and they don't know, and he asks these devas, these gods, and they keep saying, well, we don't really know the answer to that. You need to go up higher to the next load of gods. And he goes up and up through all these scales of godly realms, deva realms, that he gets to the great Brahma who is the creator. And he says to Brahma, where does the world come to an end? And Brahma answers, I am Brahma, I am the creator of the world, I am the all-powerful, the all-knowing, and so on and so forth. And he says, I didn't ask you that. I wanted to know where the world comes to an end. And this happens three times. It's quite a funny discourse.

And then Brahma pulls him aside behind a curtain. And he says, listen, I don't want them to know that I don't know the answer to that question. But I do know who knows, and that's the Buddha. And you made a mistake coming up here. You should have gone to him. So he nips down back to see the Buddha.

And he asks the Buddha, where does the world come to an end? And he says, that's not the right question. The question is, where does the world not find a footing? So Nibbāna exists at the same time as the world, as it was for him, the Buddha. And then he comes out with a statement. He says, there is a consciousness. So now, you see, it's like whenever somebody has an insight into human nature or into the world as it is, there's always a struggle for a word because the words that we have are always based on history, are always based on what we know. So for instance Freud, he has a real deep insight into the human psyche and there's no words that he can use, so he makes them up: the id, the ego, the superego.

So the Buddha doesn't particularly make up a new word. He is using consciousness in a particular way. And what he says is that there is this consciousness which is non-manifestive, and what he means by that is you won't find anything that the six senses offer us. So that's one way of looking at a human being: that the consciousness is based upon one of the six senses. You're either seeing or hearing, feeling, thinking. And he says there's nothing. It's just not manifest. There's no manifestation within that consciousness. And then he says that there's no boundary. There's no boundary. In other words, there's nothing there which is, which there is a relationship to. It's complete, whole and entire unto itself. And then he says it's full of light.

And that's one experience, an experience of Nibbāna. So that's our aim. Nibbāna can be experienced in different ways. That is a specific experience of the Buddha within, in itself. But every time we sit in the position of the observer, we're right with that. We're actually almost on the point of a Nibbanic experience because when you're in that position, ask yourself, am I suffering? It might be that there is some very negative mental state there. You might be feeling very sad about somebody who's died, for instance, a friend. And as soon as you become aware of it, as soon as it's there, you're allowing the heart to express its sadness and therefore its healing.

But whatever is aware of it, ask yourself, is that actually suffering? So this is a magical position to find within ourselves. It doesn't heal the heart, it allows the heart to heal itself. That's all the heart wants to do. The heart just wants to express its problems and it expresses it in feelings.

And that's where we start dealing with these so-called hindrances. All those things that are agitating, are depressing. The five. All the ones to do with desires that we want. All the aversions that we have which include the fears and anxieties. All that dullness and lethargy which has been a way of indulgence and a way of suppressing stuff. Often when we're in a miserable state, we'll just throw ourselves on the sofa and fall asleep, and so it's a nice way of just pushing things away. And of course it's very pleasant, isn't it? When you wake up in the morning on a Sunday and you might just have been tempted just to keep sleeping in that subliminal state where you just keep turning over. And then you might get up and have a

cup of tea and get back in bed.

So there's all these sort of, that laziness. Well of course it's building up a mental state, and that's what we often feel when we're sitting as a hindrance. A hindrance meaning it's the danger of us being pulled into it, of giving into it. That's why it's a hindrance, is that they're actually teaching us something, these hindrances. And then there's all that area of shame and guilt, remorse, sort of secondary stuff that comes when we've not behaved in a way that's moral or ethical. And there's also, including that, the sense of just that restlessness. Restlessness. It can be physical, it can be emotional, it can be mental. It can be the three of them. And you just can't stop fidgeting. You can't stop doing something.

And the final one is doubt. But this is a type of doubt. I mean, the Buddha definitely wants us to doubt in the sense of ask ourselves, is what the Buddha is teaching true for us? Remember, this is a process of investigation. So belief becomes a real hindrance. He doesn't want us to believe anything, but he does want us to have confidence. And that's what sceptical doubt takes away from us, because if you don't have confidence, then that doubt takes you over. In anything, in any walk of life, and you can't move. You're paralysed.

I once had a student, I don't know what happened to him, but he got into this terrible psychological place of extreme doubt. He couldn't decide whether to get out of bed or not. I mean, it's just amazing when you think about it. And I'm not so sure I could help. I'm not sure I helped him, except to say, make a decision at some point to get out of bed and get out of bed. But he couldn't motivate himself. It was very, very strange. Unfortunately, I lost contact, but I presume he's found a way out of that.

So these mental states, these hindrances that come up, are actually to be used in order to keep reinforcing in ourselves, to re-establish a different relationship with the world. Not me, not mine. And of course the danger is then that you're opting out. You're finding a place where you're becoming non-engaged. And that's why whenever we practice *vipassanā*, it's always good to do a bit of *mettā* because that re-engages us.

And basically that's what the Buddha did. If you remember, having attained this full liberation, no, just before that, you get the great doubt where Māra attacks him. So he's sitting there and all those old desires are coming up to go back to the family, back to the life that he once loved, et cetera, et cetera. And he tries to steady that doubt by touching the earth, and the earth goddess rises and says, you've got every right to seek this liberation. Because Māra is telling him that he's not good enough, he's no good. It's a waste of time. Why are you doing this? And having perfected the virtue of generosity, it means that his purpose wasn't just for himself. It was actually to try and recognise that if he found it, he could help everybody else. And that was his engagement. That was what gave him that courage to just break through.

And then afterwards, having overcome the doubt that anyone would actually understand him, sends him into forty-five years of teaching. And that's what he devotes his life to.

So just to sum up: right awareness. Bring to mind that childlike way of looking at things before conceptual thinking, before words, just to be able to see. And we can practise that just a very simple way. We can stare at something, just stare at it, and let the information come to us. And what it is we're actually investigating: these three characteristics. And to use the five hindrances as ways of seeing these three characteristics. And slowly but surely, I'm sure you've all experienced life getting a little bit better because of our practice, just a little.

So abandon progress. That's a poison, honestly. It's a poison. I always get students saying, I'm not progressing, or where am I going? You're not going anywhere. You're standing right here and you're observing process. And in observing process, that is the process of liberation. To see and understand how things have come to arise. That's the Buddhist sentence.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, and that by your devotion to practice you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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