

Sati – a torch-light in a dark cellar

This is an overview of several Dhamma talks given between 2009 and 2016

Sati (awareness) is the key to practice, and it is the only short-cut given in the Buddhist scriptures. In the Majjhima Nikaya, the Lord Buddha says that someone who maintains *sati* for seven days and seven nights, 24 hours a day, can expect one of two ‘fruits’: final knowledge (Arahantship) here and now or attainment to Anāgāmi. If *sati* is less strong, it might take seven months or seven years, or for most of us seven or 70 lifetimes, because for us *sati* only comes once in a while. Progress depends on the strength of *sati*. But the *kilesas* are lazy; they don’t want to practice. They want to live in a dream world and, even when we think we are doing walking or sitting meditation, our minds can be off in a dream much of the time. The *kilesas* love it when this happens, but it has nothing to do with *sati*. *Sati* is pure awareness in which there is no judgement, no association, no thought and no labelling of things as good or bad; there is just knowingness, whether of the body, feelings, memories or thoughts.

Than Acharn Mahā Bua was once travelling in a car, and he saw a man at the centre of a busy intersection picking up things that had fallen from his truck. There were cans and bottles scattered all over the place, and he had parked his truck right in the middle of the crossing, quite unconcerned as he retrieved the fallen objects, oblivious to the cars trying to avoid him and the traffic becoming snarled up. Than Acharn Mahā Bua recognised the situation as a good illustration of the lack of *sati*. If the *citta* does not have *sati* to govern it, it is like a person who is thoughtless or even crazy. This is the reason I use the word *sati* in preference to the word mindfulness. That truck driver may have been mindful when picking up all the fallen objects, but he certainly had no *sati*, no awareness of what was going on around him, even though an accident could have happened at any time. He was concerned only with what he himself was doing at that moment, unaware of everything else going on.

Sati has an objective quality, and it lets us see what is happening. It’s not the same as seeing a tree and deciding whether we like it or not – that’s not *sati*. When we have *sati*, we see colour and form and know that they are matched within the brain to a certain kind of object, whether a leaf, flower, tree or person. The eye, ears and other senses only receive sense inputs, but the mind identifies and knows them. It seems to do this instantly, but what has really happened is that *viññāṇa* (consciousness) has identified a sense impression which is then processed and recognised, after being matched with sample data stored in *saññā* (memory). This is a sequential process, similar to what happens in a very fast computer. *Sati* is knowing that this is happening. If we don’t have *sati* at this level, we are really just robots controlled by an internal program that runs on and on and on. In our case, the program is conditioning, and it can be very difficult to go against it because we don’t want to escape our conditioning. Why do you think the Lord Buddha described *Nibbāna* as the unconditioned? If we can’t remove the conditioning in our hearts, we are no more than robots acting out a program. We have to remove the ‘if–then’ condition: if I see, hear, taste, smell or touch something then I get greedy or lustful, or if I don’t see something then I get angry, and so on. It’s all conditioning, and we won’t be able to see this fully unless we develop *sati*.

We need *samādhi* to train *sati*, and *samādhi* means focusing attention on just one point, on a meditation object such as the breath at the tip of the nose or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*. We need to be clearly aware that the in-breath is long or short, deep or shallow, or that

the *buddho* is fast or slow, clear or unclear. This training develops *sati*; our concentration is on the *buddho* or the breath, but the sharp, clear awareness of the meditation object is the thing that develops *sati*. We should aim to know everything about the meditation object and not let go of it, until thoughts quieten down and disappear. This is all hard work, of course, and most of us don't want to do it. It is much easier to live in a world of fantasy, of idle dreams, wondering about the state of our meditation practice or whether we will become enlightened this year or the next. Such dreams are useless.

We need to concentrate on one point until *sati* goes back to the heart. This is the level of *sati* that we must have to advance in our practice. It's not the same as mindfulness, which is related to our 'mind' being 'full' of one thing at one time without knowing anything else. Of course, initially we are aware only of the meditation object, whether the breath or the *buddho*, but then our awareness widens to knowing that there is a thought, a feeling or a memory. When that happens, we are aware of these things and bring the concentration back to the meditation object. The crucial thing is that we *know* – that's the point. We know what is going on. In time, thoughts, feelings or memories don't bother us; they pass by like clouds, though we still know them. This knowingness is a function of the *citta*, and it's what we have to develop. Without it, we are blinded by whatever comes in through the senses and by thoughts which arise. If we hear a dog barking, for instance, it can stay in our minds for hours, but if *sati* is present we simply know there is a barking dog and go back to the *buddho* or the breath. When *sati* goes back to the heart in *upacāra samādhi*, it's an amazing experience, even though no-one is taking hold of it. There is no-one to say, "I'm having this wonderful experience", or "This experience is wonderful or awesome". It's simply a pure experience, for there are no *kilesas* to take hold of it or comment upon it. Normally, the *kilesas* are like fog obscuring our ability to see clearly, but once they are gone we can see things as they are. *Sati* is the clear view that just sees whatever is there without attaching to, commenting on or colouring it.

Upacāra samādhi, the world beyond thought, is amazing in itself. It's a safe haven where we feel relieved, relaxed and energised. If we have been there long enough, we realise the extent to which thoughts, and particularly memories, stir up all our troubles, fears and doubts. Without thoughts, there are no worries, fears or doubts, and no loneliness or sadness. Actually, it's astonishing that thoughts can create all these things that trouble us so much and cause us such pain. When we have been in *upacāra samādhi* for a while, when thoughts have quietened down, we feel that we're in a safe house where nothing can bother us, even though we still experience the world. We experience phenomena, we see inner images or hear inner sounds as they come and go, but we know we are safe. The moment we come out of *upacāra samādhi*, the engine of thought starts up again, and all the troubles return. This is why people want to go back into *upacāra samādhi* again and again – it's so calm, quiet and peaceful. Once in *upacāra samādhi*, if we continue to keep hold of the meditation object, we will find that everything converges to one point. This is *appanā samādhi* and is the first wonder of meditation. When everything converges, the object and the observer become one point. That point is just knowingness; that's all that we can say – clear unobscured knowingness. When we come out, all we can say is that we have been recharged, that we have not been asleep and that we just "knew". When the *citta* converges to one point, the five *khandhas* disappear; they are put aside or excluded for a while and have no impact on the *citta*. The body disappears and feeling disappears; you can sit or stand in the same position for six or eight hours without moving a muscle. This experience tells us that the *citta* and the five *khandhas* are not the same, for the *citta* is the one thing that does not disappear. Everything else just vanishes; the whole universe falls apart, becomes

dust and disappears, though it returns when we come out of *appanā samādhi*. It's similar to the experience of a deep dreamless sleep when we are unaware of what is going on. In deep *samādhi*, however, we wouldn't feel anything even if the body was carried off somewhere or chopped into pieces. We would only know what had happened to the body when we came out of *appanā samādhi*. It's similar to leaving your car to take a walk through the woods. If thieves came and smashed your car during the walk, you would only see the damage when you returned.

Are you beginning to get some inkling of the relationship between *samādhi* and *sati*? Training in *samādhi* develops and nurtures *sati* because *sati* is none other than the knowingness that we discover when everything else has dropped away. That knowingness is there all the time; it has always been there and will never disappear, and it is the only true home we really have. Everything else is fake, like the hairpieces, spectacles or false teeth that we attach to our bodies. These items make us appear to be something we are not, just as wearing a white coat makes us look like a doctor, or driving a Mercedes makes us look rich. It's stupid, isn't it? These are all external things and they change, but the *citta* does not change. The external things make up what we call the three-fold universe, and they are constantly changing from one state to another. We know that our present universe has arisen and will cease, and that we ourselves have been born and will die (though we don't like to think about it). The only thing that does not change and is eternal is the *citta*.

Once we have trained ourselves to have *sati*, we can get down to work, the work of observing and overcoming our attachment to the five *khandhas* we think of as ourselves. What we think of as I, mine or self is nothing more than a very clever combination of the five *khandhas*. Taking the example of the computer, it has only two states, off and on or 0 and 1. Yet, it is amazing what computers can do – word-processing, video-editing, playing music or showing films. Now, imagine what can be done with five states, and you can see the reason for all the different human personalities in the world. In Buddhism there are 31 realms of existence, and, aside from the human realm which contains relatively few beings, there are a lot of beings in the heavenly realms, but most inhabit the animal, ghost and hell realms. Whenever you think of yourself at a particular moment, try to see which of the five *khandhas* is involved; if there is strength or sickness, that's the body; if there is sadness, that's feeling; if there is planning for the future, that's discursive thought, and so on. All our experiences fit into one of these five categories, and they make up what we usually think of as our self. Can you grasp this? Do you get it? We all know that the workings of a computer are an illusion, albeit a useful one, but the same is true of the constantly changing five *khandhas*. Their combination produces that thing we call I or self, and if we look back 20 years we can see how our personalities or roles have changed over that time. As Shakespeare says, "All the world's a stage...and one man in his time plays many parts", and all because of the *khandhas* working in combination.

Without *sati*, we are groping aimlessly in the dark. *Sati* is the shining light that reveals what is actually there, without any kind of judgement. It tells us there is a feeling, thought or memory, but it doesn't see the body or the other *khandhas* as good or bad; *sati* just sees them as they are. So, why is it so difficult to train *sati*? Did we come into this world as robots, as human beings acting just like robots? It's vital that we examine our conditioning and go against it, though it seems to me that very few people, particularly young people, are interested in taking up the challenge. Even in this monastery, I see people going through the motions, doing things without reflection. A true human being is able to reflect on his actions and their outcome, but people seem to lack this ability. That's why I encourage my students to undertake daily reflection, to recollect each evening what they have done during the day, so they can be aware of what they are doing and why. This practice can help to develop the kind of awareness needed

to progress in meditation. This kind of introspection or reflection is new to most people, however, so they either find it too difficult or forget to do it at all. But it's important. The point of evening reflection is not to tell ourselves that we have been good or bad, but to see our actions by body, speech or mind and realise their effects. Daily reflection is part of the training in *sati*, and is the starting point for the development of wisdom. The more we know what we are doing and why, the more we come to see that our actions are caused by greed, hatred and delusion. Behind these lies *dukkha* — the first noble truth. We need to be able to see *dukkha* if we are to find a way out of *dukkha*. We don't want the moments of restlessness or boredom, so we paint them over with things we enjoy, like drinking a cup of tea, smoking a cigarette or going for a walk. Moments of *dukkha* are instantly covered up by the *kilesas*, for they don't want to see or understand *dukkha*, just as they don't want to see the true nature, the loathsomeness, of the body. The *kilesas* don't want to see the truth; they want to have fun. When we remember our lives, we mostly remember the fun parts, don't we? That's why most people don't think they have *dukkha* and don't see the point of meditation practice. If we think like this, we have fallen for the *kilesas* again, just as we've fallen for them for innumerable lifetimes. You shouldn't underestimate the power and cleverness of the *kilesas*. If you see red, they paint it white, and it happens in a flash. Whatever our experiences, the *kilesas* paint them over so we cannot discover the truth, just as they make us love the body by focussing only on the skin and not the disgusting things inside. In fact, the *kilesas* would be completely satisfied if bodies consisted only of skin filled with air like a balloon; all they want to see are the forms, the externals to which they are so attached. They don't want to see blood, pus, grease, faeces and urine, do they?

The truth is that we have *dukkha* all the time, but it is painted over by the *kilesas* which divert our attention, just like a magician performing a trick. Without *sati*, without determination, without overcoming our laziness, we will never, ever come to know the tricks of the magician, and we will continue to fall for them time after time. Imagine being at a circus watching a great magician; we fall for his illusions because we are too lazy to get up and look behind the stage or because, even if we have the determination to go behind the stage, we become distracted by another of his tricks. Please don't underestimate the power of the *kilesas*. In most people, the power of the *Dhamma* is very weak. Though it is hidden in our heart and sometimes shows up, most of the time the *kilesas* are in the driving seat, telling us what to do, how to think and how to react. When monks ordain, their *kilesas* don't ordain, so at first we have to train them to be "good" *kilesas*, though it can be hard work. For example, when we see stinginess in ourselves, we can turn it into generosity, or when we see greed or hate, we can turn them into renunciation or *mettā* rather than falling for them. Again, we can purposely do the things we don't like doing, such as fasting, and refrain from doing the things we like to do, such as talking. The *Dhamma* has to be strong to cope with that, of course, but it does really confuse the *kilesas*. The *kilesas* maintain their stronghold by liking this or disliking that, wanting this or not wanting that. But the moment you do the opposite of what they tell you, the *kilesas* have lost their authority and don't know how to control you any more. They can only be undermined or confused for a while though, for they are experts at finding a way round, a new way of which you were previously unaware. This is because the *kilesas* are us; they are what we are. They have been with us since the beginning, and they know everything we know. Whatever we learn, they learn as well, including our tricks against them. This means that we have to come up with new ways to fool them time after time. You have to understand the kind of enemy you face. The *kilesas* that fool us into thinking "This is me, this is mine, this is myself" have been with us for billions of lives, and they have become extremely skilled. But we have the *Dhamma*, and the *kilesas* cannot match the *Dhamma*. The more we develop the *Dhamma* of virtue,

of morality, of generosity, respect and gratitude, the less opportunity the *kilesas* have of giving us a beating. When we develop the power of *sati*, the power of awareness, the *kilesas* have no weapons that can withstand it. Developing *paññā*, which includes doing daily reflection, is a way of undermining or cutting off the *kilesas*, but without the light of *sati* to see what is going on *paññā* cannot work. Wisdom cannot work in the dark; without the sharp light of *sati*, it will remain at the level of guesswork or speculation, and it will not be able to cut down the *kilesas*.

So, please understand how important *sati* really is. When a dog barks, we usually think, “A dog has barked”, and memories and associations instantly come into play. When that happens the *kilesas* have drawn us away from our meditation object and interrupted our concentration. Instead, with *sati*, we are aware of just the sound, whatever sound it is. Without this level of *sati*, *paññā* cannot get to work, so we have to develop it to the point where we can keep with the meditation object for at least ten minutes without being drawn away by the *kilesas* into thoughts, memories or feelings. Sometimes, as we get more and more concentrated, thoughts diminish and calmness increases, and *sati* can be lost at that point. This happens because, after concentrating on and knowing the breath or the *buddho*, we jump to the feeling of calm and stay with it. After a short while, however, the calm diminishes, for our *sati* has stopped working. This happens because we have forgotten that calm is the byproduct of developing *sati* through concentration. If we just stay with the feeling of calm without knowing the breath or the *buddho*, *sati* will not develop. I’ll give you an analogy. Our work is to stay with the *buddho* or the breath, and this practice can be compared to digging a hole. As long as we dig at the same place, the hole gets deeper, and in the context of meditation this means that the calm, peace or happiness that arises gets more intense. If we keep on digging, these feelings will increase, but instead, because they are pleasant feelings, we jump onto them and forget to do the work of digging. This is a common problem, and we have to overcome it by being aware that our attention is switching to the pleasant feelings. The moment we are aware that this is happening, we must switch back to the *buddho* or the breath and try to increase our interest in observing them. The switch happened because we were more interested in the pleasant side effects. So, the solution is to be interested only in our meditation object and not the results or side effects of our meditation.

We need *sati* to fight the *kilesas*, and they are extremely powerful – the best magicians in the world. We need *sati* to recognise the *dukkha* that is always present; the moments of *dukkha* that we experience every day are uncountable, but we usually don’t notice them. How can we get wiser if we don’t recognise that there is *dukkha*? If we don’t see it, we can’t investigate it, and if we don’t investigate it, we can’t gain wisdom. *Sati* is crucial, and we can only develop it in *samādhi* practice; staying with our meditation object and developing the knowingness that comes from the heart. Sooner or later, *sati* will lead us to the heart; it will reveal how, in the stillness of *samādhi*, something starts to “ripple” as the *kilesas* try to get into motion. If we are really aware, we can see the *kilesas* trying to get out, but if the *Dhamma* is powerful at that moment, it can keep them at bay. Over time, the more practice we do, the calmer we get and the stiller the heart becomes. Then, when the *kilesas* have died down completely, we reach the stage of *upacāra samādhi* or *appanā samādhi*. It’s when we come out of *appanā samādhi* that we see the power of *sati*, for then it is full-blown. It has enormous power at that point, and no *kilesas* can stand up to the power of *sati* combined with *paññā*.

Sati is like a torch-light that shines in a dark cellar and reveals what is hidden there. Wherever we shine the torch, we see, and the *kilesas* can only work in the dark. Wherever the light shines, the *kilesas* have to hide, and that’s why Than Acharn Mahā Bua says that when there is a moment of *sati* there are no *kilesas*. And when there are no *kilesas*, there is no intention, and intention is the thing that creates *kamma*. So, *sati* can help us steer clear of making un-

wholesome *kamma*. If we have developed *sati* to the full, we can have *sati* at the point of death. This can bring great joy because we can decide where the *citta* goes next. Because of *kamma*, we have many possible paths at death, and if *sati* has been fully developed we can choose to take the most wholesome path. For example, if you want to continue with meditation practice and if your *kamma* allows it, you can choose to become a human being again, or if you want to rest, you can go to the *deva* realms. If one of the paths is leading to hell, you don't have to go and can follow other paths instead. This is the freedom that we gain from developing *sati*, *samādhi* and *paññā* and using them for investigation, specifically the investigation of pain, but it takes a lot of determination. That's why I invite you to put effort into developing *sati*. From the moment you wake up, have nothing else in mind but the meditation object, the breath or the *buddho*, whether sitting, walking or lying down. Do this until concentration and *sati* separate out; you will feel them "snap" as *sati* goes to the heart. You have to understand that concentration and *sati* are two different things, and that *sati* is the faculty that has to be nurtured and developed to the full through our practice of concentration.