

CHAPTER SIX

BARE ATTENTION

SATI-PATTHANA SUTTA AS A FOUNDATION AND CHIEF FACTOR

TODAY I SHALL discuss "*bare attention*" in Vipassana meditation, what we mean by it and how to apply it in mindfulness meditation. The main discourse for Vipassana meditation is considered to be the discourse on the foundation of mindfulness — Satipatthana. The Pali words *Sati* means mindfulness. *Patthana* means the foundation that must be acquired first. It also means a leading or chief factor that has to guide, guard and sustain the mind in developing other required factors such as concentration and direct knowledge. *Patthana* can also mean placing, here placing of mindfulness rightly on an object leading to the rise of wisdom. Mindfulness is fundamental throughout the practice, from start to finish. We try to establish mindfulness. First, we have to discover that we are not mindful. Our mind goes here, there and everywhere. The mind sometimes is thinking when we are not supposed to be thinking or when we do not really intend to. By recognizing the fact that mindfulness is not yet present, we can make a good start in our effort to gain it.

Sati means mindfulness, to be mindful of or to be consciously aware of an object, whatever that may be. We divide objects into primary and secondary objects for technical

reasons. Mindfulness means constant awareness of an object, without any break. It is being aware of one object after another arising here and now. There is no break or gap in between, for example, breathing, the ticking of the clock, the sounds coming from outside, the road, being contemplative of sensation and so on. Any object can be a meditation object and to be aware of it continuously is called mindfulness practice. This is the main task in the initial stage of Vipassana meditation practice. It is about being conscious of something at the present moment, being conscious of the world we live in. It is about merely *registering* an object perceived directly through any of the six doors of our senses.

EXPERIENCE AND JUDGEMENT

We do not live in the same world all the time. For example, someone is thinking about his work. Then his world at that time is his thoughts about his job. At that moment, he is not living in any other world, but in the world of thinking. He is conscious of his job, and if he were to meditate at that time his job is the object of his meditative mind. So there are only two things out there — the meditative mind and the meditative object.

As we have discussed before, there are six worlds and we do not live in the same world all of the time. Prof. Oliver Goldsmith of Einstein Medical School, New York tells of a man who was operated on for his blindness. The patient had been blind since the age of five. He was forty-five when he was operated on. He had lived as a blind man for forty years. He could not remember seeing anything during the first five years of his life because he was too young. He had lived for forty

years through listening, touching, smelling, tasting and thinking. He studied, graduated and had a job. He even got married. His wife insisted that he had the operation. The doctors also persuaded him to have the operation because they wanted to try out their newly found technology. So both eyes were operated on and fortunately he regained his sight. On the first day that they removed the bandage, the surgeon stood in front of him without saying anything. He could see the surgeon but he could not make anything out of what he was seeing. Only when the surgeon stated to talk did he recognize him and say, *"Oh, it is you!"* This is because he had not lived in the seeing world for the last forty years. He was instead living in the hearing world. So, he could not make anything out of what his newly repaired eyes could see.

We make many things out of what we see and hear. We create happiness as well as unhappiness. We create joy; we create agitation, through what we see, what we hear, what we taste, what we smell, what we feel and what we think. We need to be fully conscious of this. In the case of this man for the last forty years, consciousness never operated between his eyes and a visual object. However, between the two physical objects — the sounds and the ears, consciousness had been operating. So as soon as he heard the voice of the surgeon he was able to make something out of it, identifying someone he knew. When he was having physiotherapy, he was made to walk and open doors without touching or feeling. When he started walking, even for just one or two steps, he would jump, he could not judge distance through his use of sight.

This is how our mind operates when the meditation object and the meditative mind come together. The mind that

operates at this time is called consciousness. The mind and consciousness are the same. The mind that is called consciousness is something that operates between two objects. The ear is a physical object and the sound is another physical object. When they come together, then the mind functions and becomes consciousness. You become conscious of the sound. That is the height of the cognitive process. In the same way, you become conscious of visual objects. You become aware or conscious of touching, tasting, seeing, etc. This is how things operate. What we should do is to just pay bare attention to it without judging. Everything in the world is a meditation object.

When we see things we make something out of it; and what follows from there is our judgement. As we have discussed how we judge the hair. The hair on our head, we love it, it is pleasant. That is because we interpret it as "*mine*" — this is *my* hair. We wash it every day. Once it is cut and separated from our head, we do not bother with it or care for it any more. Our attitude has changed. There is no more attachment to that hair. Should your hair fall into a plate of food that you are about to eat, your attitude towards the food will change. This is what is meant by judgement. If your hair happens to be in my plate, if my hair happens to be in your plate, it is even worse. Even if you know I wash my hair every day and I know you wash your hair every day. Yet, still we cannot bear it. As we form an opinion and make a judgement, we unconsciously decide not to experience things fully.

Another thing that we often judge is the food we eat. When the food is in the pot or on the table, it looks very nice. Even before we eat, we may say it looks delicious. Then you

put the food in your mouth and chew it. After the space of one or two seconds, you will not want to see it anymore, although that is exactly what you are about to swallow. Just try taking it out and looking at it, how will you feel? Your attitude has now changed. This is what we call judging. All our reactions are judgements. "*Oh, It's disgusting*" we might say or rather judge. Some may even vomit. When this happens and the food we have eaten comes out, we rush to wash it away. We do not want to see it any more. Nevertheless, this is what we have inside our body. Therefore, this is an example of how we keep changing our attitudes. This is our reaction. We keep reacting to the object — to what we see, to what we taste, to what we smell. The same thing is true with sound. When we are expecting someone and when we hear the sound of a car engine, we feel happy. But when you are reading or when you want silence and you can hear the sound of a car, you may feel disturbed. Therefore, you make different judgements of the same sound. When we practise bare attention, we say to ourselves "*hearing, hearing, and hearing.*" We do not even say listening. We just say hearing. We say tasting — not good taste or bad taste. There is no value judgement attached to it. Just bare attention.

NON-JUDGMENTAL NATURE OF VIPASSANA

In Vipassana meditation, the Buddha even goes so far as to say, wandering mind and concentrated mind are equally valuable as meditative objects. To quote the Pali passage from the Satipatthana Sutta: "*Samkhittam va cittam samkhittam cittanti pajanati, vikkhittam va cittam vikkhittam cittanti pajanati*" which means a *shrunken mind and wavering mind are to be treated in the same manner by being aware of it and*

then comprehending its true nature. When a mind is shrunken into an object, it is totally immersed into it; this is a concentrated mind. A wandering mind never stays in one place; it travels all over the places. The Buddha said that if you are aware of these two — a concentrated and a wandering mind — if you are mindful of both, just pay bare attention to it and do not judge. Do not say the wandering mind is bad or the concentrated mind is good. Make no value judgement.

We know we are usually judgmental because of the unsettled minds. We often hear people saying that meditation makes mind still and calm. This implies to us that the wandering mind is the very obstacle to meditation. This is where Vipassana really differs from *Samatha* in handling "*restless mind*."

To have a concentrated mind is very important for all meditation purposes. But even though concentration is very important, you still have to treat the concentrated mind just like the wandering mind because both are *objects*. The presence and absence of them are object of contemplation. You have to treat each object objectively, unlike the way we treat our hair and our food, which is quite prejudiced and subjective, not objective.

To see things as they are is the ultimate aim of Vipassana meditation. When being prejudiced and subjective, we cannot see things as they actually are. The whole objective of Buddhism is to see *dukkha* as *dukkha*, and not to react to it. In Vipassana meditation, when observing pain, it is a practice to see pain as pain, no longer reacting to it creating agitation, impatience, frustration or disappointment. So long as we are

reacting and continuously justifying our reactions, we do not yet see things as they really are yet.

Another Pali passage from the same Sutta worthy of quoting is "*Sadosam va cittam sadosam cittanti pajanati. Niddosam va cittam niddosam cittanti pajanati,*" meaning *an angry mind and a not angry-mind, maybe a compassionate or a loving one, these two are the same.* Ethically speaking, an angry mind and a compassionate mind cannot be the same. The angry mind is bad because it can create tension. It is bad for your health. It creates many problems. As far as the ethical aspect is concerned, we can even have different views as to whether anger is good or bad. Some say that anger makes people take you seriously and therefore is justifiable. It is very subjective and open to personal judgement. This is when you approach the issue through ethics (*sila*). But, the Buddha said that when you approach these two psychologically, you have to rise above the ethical aspect of it.

It may be said here, by saying what we have just said, that we do not underestimate the role of ethical morality in *bhavana* but rather emphasize the two different approaches at different levels. Both are indeed part of the training in the Noble Eightfold Path.

DO NOT SUPPRESS IT

Remember that in Vipassana meditation there are three stages — learning, controlling and liberating stages. You need to learn about the angry mind before you can control anger. At the second stage, you are able to control the angry mind and, at the third stage, you will be able to liberate your mind from

anger. Liberation comes from *direct knowing*, and *direct awareness (sati)* leads to direct knowledge (*sampajana*).

In the first stage of Vipassana meditation, we are developing bare attention. We are talking about this today. What you need to do is just to observe — to observe that this is an angry mind or a mind lacking in anger. A murderous thought and a loving thought are equally important as meditation objects. When a murderous thought arises, you note "*this is murderous thought, murderous thought, murderous thought*", and just be fully conscious of its presence; to be mindfully experiencing it and knowing what a murderous thought is like. Because without understanding it, we are not going to be able to get rid of this angry mind, we will not be able to control it. If we are anxious to control it, we force ourselves — "*Don't get angry*". We are just suppressing it, instead of accepting and trying to see it. If you say, "*Do not get angry*", it means you are suppressing it. If you are suppressing something, you will not be able to see it. But, it does not mean that it has gone away. It is there. It may pop up without your knowledge. This is what happens all the time.

We normally learn about what is good and what is bad. Later we begin imposing a golden rule on ourselves "*Anger is not good, I must not be angry.*" Nevertheless, anger is still practically there. So, it does not work that way. Therefore, what we should do is to try to accept it and see it as an angry mind with no whatsoever value judgement attached to it. Normally we would intellectually analyze it: a loving mind is wholesome and an angry one unwholesome consciousness. Nevertheless, Vipassana meditation is something that will lead you to transcend both wholesome and unwholesome. Without

unwholesome, you will not have wholesome. One does not exist without the other as they belong to dualistic states diametrically opposed to each other. They both belong to the *kammic* (*karmic*) process. Nibbana is realized once the *kammic* process ceases to operate.

In the case of the Buddha and the arahants, there is no more wholesome or unwholesome *kamma* (*karma*). In Buddhist philosophy, the end of *kamma* and the end of *dukkha* (suffering) are the same. It is nibbana. When we say the end of *kamma*, we do not mean just the end of unwholesome *kamma* but also that of wholesome *kamma*. What has led us to be born as human beings is wholesome *kamma*. It is leading us to suffer in a human world. When we look at things as wholesome or unwholesome, this is at a mundane level, with two standpoints. The middle path which we also call the Noble Eight-Fold Path of which Vipassana meditation is a very important aspect, is something that transcends both. Normally when we do good things in a mundane sense, we try to get rid of as much of the unwholesome and accumulate as much as the wholesome. But, the aim of Vipassana meditation is to get rid of both. That is why value judgement is not attached even to wholesome *kamma*.

JUST KNOWING IT

The Buddha gave instruction that when the mind is concentrated, know it as a concentrated mind; when it is not, then know it as an un-concentrated mind. Normally, when our mind is not concentrated and it goes here and there, we tend to get disappointed and upset. People mumble, "*Oh, I'm not doing well in this session; my mind keeps wandering; I have a*

lot of disturbances and distractions." These are habitual reactions; we are conditioned to react in this way. Both wholesome and unwholesome minds are conditioned. Vipassana Meditation is a way out of *conditioning (sankhara)* as well as *being conditioned (sankhata)*. We are, of course, still in the process of conditioning and being conditioned, and not yet out of it. But the unconditioned state is where "*Bare Attention*" will lead us to. First develop Bare Attention and be open to any conditions. Merely knowing them, and not forming any opinion of or adding value judgement to them is a way to the *unconditioned state (asankhata)* here and now

NO PRE-CONCEIVED NOTION

Let us go back to another aspect of bare attention. Bare attention is not to have any preconceived notions. To give an example, you want to get rid of itchiness on your face (while meditating) and you note *itchiness, itchiness, and itchiness*. Your mind is being conditioned by the desire to get rid of the itch. Before it acts, the mind is already attached to judgement. If the itchiness does not go away, you are going to react to it. Even if it goes away, you will still react to it by saying, "*Oh, good. I've done it.*" If it does not, you feel disappointed — "*Oh, it's getting worse; the numbness in my leg is getting worse; the pain in my back is getting worse.*" This is because of the notion that this is *my back*, this is *my leg*, etc. This notion overrides or overshadows the pain or numbness. So instead of seeing the pain as it is, or the numbness as it is, we see the pain and numbness overshadowed by the preconceived notion that this is *my back* or *my leg*. That preconceived notion prolongs the pain and numbness.

Sometimes, people are encouraged to contemplate pain, saying that the pain will vanish after some continued observations. This leads to a belief that in order to get rid of pain, one has to contemplate; contemplation of pain will bring the end of pain. This is a preconceived notion of what could come about from contemplation effort. In fact, the pain may vanish or increase. Vipassana teaches only what to do if it vanishes or if it increases. We cannot command pain to disappear or increase. It is *anatta*. If the preconceived notion is there, the mind is blocked, and not open. As it is not open, it will reject any outcome not in line with one's expectation. One is not prepared to face alternative situation. Flexibility comes only with an open and receptive minds.

NOT TO GET RID OF IT BUT RATHER TO COPE WITH IT BETTER

The aim of Vipassana is not to get rid of pain, as pain is as a part of life. There is no world where there is no pain. Vipassana meditation is rather a method of how to cope with it when it arises: to make use of pain as a meditation object in order to gain *insight* that brings the end of suffering. It is true that at some stage, pain is greatly relieved and one does not feel it as one used to, one can also sit for many hours at this point and facial looks become bright, dignified, calm and serene.

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the discourse on mindfulness, there are two very important words in Pali; *sato* and *sampajano*. The first one is bare attention; that is to pay bare attention to an object by merely knowing its existence. This bare attention progresses and matures as you are collecting

data, you are registering the bare facts. You are going to see the characteristics of the object. Before that, you are not going to condition your mind and say "*The pain is impermanent*", or "*It will go away*". You must not judge or condition your mind with anything, not even with impermanence, although the law of impermanence is real and true. Nevertheless, since you are going to make use of this law only in theory in order to get rid of the pain, not because you see the impermanent nature of the pain. Also not necessarily because you see the impermanence happening here and now, but because you have read it in a book or heard of it in a dhamma talk. Moreover, you are expecting to strengthen your ability to tolerate the pain with the consolation and knowledge that the pain is impermanent and will not last forever, expecting it to go at any moment. Therefore, impermanence in theory is not a real impermanence.

BARE ATTENTION LEADS TO MINDFULNESS AND CLEAR KNOWLEDGE

When we observe an object continuously, we get a clear comprehension of these objects, about pain, sounds, breathing and so on. Clear comprehension is the realization of the six worlds. What we are trying to do first in Vipassana meditation is to establish this bare attention. We usually keep reacting all the time. However, during the course of the practice, we become aware of the lack of bare attention, and that strengthens our resolve and willingness to establish bare attention.

This bare attention will then be used for two purposes. One is for reflection. You are going to contemplate and reflect

all the objects. To reflect, first you have to establish bare attention or constant awareness. Before that is achieved, reflection can lead to speculation. To quote in Pali from the Discourse, "*Sati paccu-patthita hoti yavadeva nyanamatthaya patisatimatthaya*" meaning "*in order to reflect, we have to establish mindfulness and in order to understand things clearly as they are we have to establish mindfulness, which is bare attention.*" Before we can reflect effectively (*patisati-matthaya*), we have to establish mindfulness by paying bare attention to all that arises here and now. The second purpose of bare attention is to comprehend things as they are (*nyana matthaya*). Seeing anger just as anger not mine or me, pain just as pain not mine or me is to see things as they are. As we relate to the present moments more and more, we are now starting to progressively see things as they are and then live our life fully at the present moment. With that, the wisdom needed to live a peaceful life gradually arises.

That is why once you are in a position to control your mind, you will be able to use your mind to reflect on the object. Now, when you are trying to establish mindfulness, even if an insignificant reflection comes into your mind, you merely note "*reflection, reflection, reflection*" and try to go on with the task of establishing mindfulness. Do not actually do reflection too early and do so only with a proper consultation with the teacher.