

## Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #10 - Bare Knowing

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04/22/2014.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Discourse on the Fields for Establishing Mindfulness, the first set of instructions the Buddha is recorded offering is the first four practices of Mindfulness of Breathing. These instructions are followed with the section that Anālayo Bhikkhu calls the "refrain" because variations of it appear after each set of instructions in the sutta.

This particular version of the refrain is:

"In this way one dwells contemplating the body in the body internally, or one dwells contemplating the body in the body externally, or one dwells contemplating the body in the body both internally and externally. Or else one dwells contemplating in the body its nature of arising, or one dwells contemplating in the body its nature of vanishing, or one dwells contemplating in the body its nature of both arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that 'there is a body' is simply established in one to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and repeated mindfulness. And one dwells independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how one dwells contemplating the body in the body." <sup>1</sup>

In previous meetings we've explored contemplating the body internally and externally, the impermanent or arising and vanishing nature of the body, and knowing that "there is a body." So today I want to explore "to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and repeated mindfulness."

First there is this phrase "to the extent necessary." It is something we can easily pass over without considering. But it is worth examining.

It seems to me that the Buddha isn't telling us that we have to have perfect mindfulness. He isn't telling us that our mindfulness can't miss a beat. All we have to do is develop enough mindfulness to have "bare knowledge and repeated mindfulness" that there is a body. So while it is important to be ardent or diligent about our practice of mindfulness, we can cut ourselves a little slack. We can be a little more relaxed about it, which will actually help in our efforts to be mindful and to develop tranquility and concentration.

I think that another thing this phrase "to the extent necessary" refers to is being mindful and discerning about the quality of the mindfulness we are experiencing. It's remembering to notice whether we're really experiencing the present-moment object of attention with the deep clarity of mindfulness. This doesn't mean obsessively checking to see if our mindfulness is ok. It is just checking in periodically to notice whether our mindfulness is really, truly sufficient for the bare knowledge of what is present right now, and for maintaining a continuity of mindfulness.

So what is "bare knowledge"?

Joseph Goldstein summarizes Anālayo Bhikkhu's thoughts about it in this way:

"As Anālayo notes, bare knowledge here means observing objectively without getting lost in associations and reactions. It's the simple and direct knowing of what's present without making up stories about experience."<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, bare knowing is the knowing that accompanies what Bhikkhu Bodhi has described as "lucid awareness of present happenings."<sup>3</sup> It is the knowing that accompanies the quality of attention that is bare of judgment, though not bare of discernment or wisdom; bare of decision-making, and bare of story-telling. It is the knowing that arises from staying close to, intimate with, or directly in contact with the object of attention in the present moment.

In other places in the suttas, we find the term "direct knowledge" appearing again and again, especially in terms of the liberating insights to lead to our freedom from *dukkha*, from unsatisfactoriness and suffering. It is a kind of experiential knowing. It is not a superficial recognition based on past experience, or on something that we've read or learned from someone else's experience. This kind of bare knowing occurs when awareness is quite clear and the object of attention is quite vivid. The object stands out from everything else at that moment so that we see it clearly.

Two weeks ago I taught a form of mindfulness of breathing where we hold the whole physical body as the field of awareness, while being mindful of the breathing process. One of the benefits of that approach is that it can offer us a way to be not too spacey and not too tight. But even with that approach we need to be discerning about the quality of experiential knowing our "mindfulness" is producing. There is a difference between simply perceiving, with a little distance, what is occurring in a moment of experience, which I think of as "sort of being mindful". There's a difference between that, and actually having a clear, vivid experience, of breathing in and out moment after moment.

So with this practice we're to develop sufficient mindfulness to observe or see clearly the "bare facts" of what we're encountering with minimal conceptual overlay or elaboration. And we're not just doing it in one moment, but again and again, developing a continuity of mindful moments of bare knowing.

I want to mention two side effects of bringing this quality of "bare knowing" to our experience. As we practice in this way, our lives can come alive for us; come alive in a way that maybe they haven't in quite a long time. When we're this present for our lives, there *is* a vividness and a joy that can accompany even the most mundane things that we do.

Now I want you to understand that this doesn't mean we're walking around in a state of ecstasy all the time. But still, this vividness and joy is one of the blessings of practice. We come to appreciate the life that we have, more and more.

What may be less noticeable, but is perhaps more important, is that when we are just knowing the "bare facts" of a moment of experience, there is no identification with it. There's no sense of it being who I am. It's not "me breathing". It's just "breathing." It's not "me thinking". It just "a thought". And so forth. When there is no identification with it, then this moment of mental or physical experience is just another "event" that comes and goes in the field of awareness.

There's a huge amount of freedom in this, a huge amount. And it is available to each of us, if we just bring sufficient mindfulness so that we can have "bare knowledge and a continuity of mindfulness."

#### Notes

1. *adapted from* Bhikkhu Bodhi. MN 10, "The Four Establishments of Mindfulness," *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 282. (Used gender neutral "one" in place of "he.")
2. Goldstein, Joseph. *Mindfulness*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True Publications, Inc., 2013, p. 35.
3. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2011), "What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A canonical perspective" *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12:01, p. 25