

The Knower and The Known

(One day Retreat May 2, 1998)

This time also I will explain to you a passage from the book, which is a collection of excerpts from Mahasi Sayadaw's book. The name of the excerpt is called "The Knower and the Known". I made a new translation of this to bring it closer to the Burmese original. It is from the book called "To Nibbāna via the Noble Eight-Path". In the book on the Noble Eight-Path, at one point Sayadaw wrote—

When Vipassanā practitioner's concentration becomes strong, the right thought directs is mind so that he correctly knows the object on which mind is concentrated. Following that directing the factor of Right View knows the object directly.

How does he know?

At the beginning of the stage where concentration becomes strong enough for the mental hindrances to disappear when purity of mind begins to arise, one comes to know or see distinctly the matter that is noted and the mind that notes. When one notes rising, one knows clearly that what rises is one thing and what notes is another. When one notes falling, one knows that what falls is one thing and what notes is another. In the same way when noting lifting, stepping, putting down while walking one knows clearly that what is noted is one thing and what notes is another. In this way one distinctly knows the matter which is known and the mind which notes. And that knowing is not by imagining, but it distinct and clear understanding through just observing without imagining.

Here Sayadaw described how a yogi comes to see mind and matter clearly. When you practice Vipassanā meditation, you make notes of the objects or you try to be mindful of the objects. The purpose is to understand these objects fully or it is for the full understanding of the objects. When you make notes of rising or falling, it is to understand the rising movement and the falling movement fully. And when you note pain again, it is not to get rid of pain that you make notes, but to understand that pain fully.

For the full understanding of the objects you try to be mindful of these objects or you make notes of these objects. And full understanding means understanding what they are, understanding that they are impermanent, suffering and no soul. And also the full understanding includes removing or abandoning wrong notions regarding that object. That is what we call full understanding. I think I talked about it one time in one of the retreats. When you first practice Vipassanā meditation, you try to be mindful of the object at the present. But in the beginning your mind may not be on the meditation object only. Your mind may wander here and there quite often. That is because your concentration is weak, your concentration is not strong yet. You cannot keep the mind where you want it to be. It goes here and there.

But with perseverance and with patience you go on and a time will come when your mind is on the meditation object only. Even if there is wandering, you can catch it right away. You will not be cut it away by this wandering for maybe ten seconds, thirty seconds. You will be able to catch it right away. You may even be able to stop it before it goes out. That is

possible with practice. When your mind can be on the meditation object most of the time, your mind is said to have gained concentration.

Every object is presented to you via the six sense doors. You are able to make notes of or you are able to be mindful of. Although there may be different objects at different moments, there is always the mindfulness or concentration on the side. So object A and then mindfulness of object A, object B and then mindfulness of object B, object C and then mindfulness of object C. There is always mindfulness in the mind although the objects may vary at different moments. That means there is always mindfulness and concentration at every moment. When your mind can be on the main object only, then you are said to gain what is called the momentary concentration. And when you gain the momentary concentration, you are said to gain what is called purity of mind.

Purity of mind can be understood in two ways. Your mind is pure at that time because it is not contaminated by mental hindrances. Also your mind is said to be pure because there is always mindfulness and concentration. It is not mixed with distractions. So pure can mean "without impurities" and also pure can mean "unmixed". Your flow of mind is unmixed with distractions and you are always on the object. When your mind can be on the meditation object only and your mind does not wander, then your mind becomes settled down, becomes quiet. That is the time when you begin to see the objects vividly and clearly. Before that time although you may think that you see the object clearly, it is not really clearly that you see. But when mind becomes settled, when mind becomes concentrated, then these objects manifest themselves to you vividly and clearly.

Mahasi Sayadaw spoke about the Right Thought and the Right View. Right Thought is one mental state. It is the one that takes the mind onto the object, that puts the mind onto the object. That is called Right Thought. Right Thought does not mean thinking (in the usual sense). It is called Right Thought but actually it is the mental state that takes the mind or that takes consciousness onto the object or takes the mind or puts the mind onto the object. It is essential that there should be mental state so that it can take the mind to the object. Once the mind is on the object, Right View, another mental state understands the object clearly or objects correctly. These two mental states are important for the correct understanding of objects or seeing objects as they are without any distractions.

Right Thought takes the mind to the object and then Right View understands the object, sees the object as it is. That comes only when your mindfulness and concentration becomes strong. When concentration becomes strong, your mind is free from mental hindrances and also distractions so that it resembles a glass of water of which the particles of dirt have settled down. When the particles settle down, water becomes clear and also it is still. When it is still, it is without particles of dirt, you can see through water clearly. In the same way when there are what are called mental hindrances in our minds like desire, anger and so on, our minds are said to be contaminated and our minds are dirty. We cannot see objects clearly.

With practice they settle down, and our minds become clear. Also we keep our mind on the object; that means the mind becomes steady. When the mind becomes steady and it is without mental hindrances, then it is like a clear glass of water. We begin to see things clearly.

When a person has reached that stage, then he is said to have achieved the second stage of purity which is the purity of mind. So Sayadaw said when purity of mind begins to arise, one comes to know or see distinctly the matter that is noted and the mind that notes. Now there are no distractions and your mind is always on the object. You begin to see the objects clearly and you begin to see that your mind makes notes of the object, for example rising and falling.

Your mind is making notes 'rising', 'falling', 'rising', 'falling'. Formally although you may be noting 'rising' and 'falling', you think the 'noting' and 'rising' and 'falling' are mixed up. But now you see these two things clearly and distinctly; the one that makes notes and the other that is noted. It is important that you see these two things separately and clearly. To know distinctly the matter that is noted and the mind that notes. Rising and falling of the abdomen is matter, it is made up of material properties; so this is matter. The thing that notes that matter is mind. So you see that mind and matter 'arising' and also 'disappearing' simultaneously.

There is 'rising', there is the 'awareness of rising'. Then 'rising' stops and then 'falling' begins. When it is 'falling', then there is another mind that is aware of falling. At the moments of rising and falling, there is noting as rising and falling, rising and falling. You see these two things going on at the moment. At the moment of rising, there is a rising which is matter and there is the awareness or noting which is mind, so mind and matter going on in pairs. The next moment there is 'falling' and then there is noting of falling. Again there is 'rising' and then noting of rising, and then 'falling' the noting of falling.

At every moment what you see is just these two things; mind and matter or the subject and the object that which notes and that which is noted. You see only these two things actually. You do not see a 'person' or a 'being' in these things. We are so used to thinking in terms of 'beings' and 'persons' that it is very difficult to get rid of this notion. But when you see for yourself through practice that there are only these two things at this moment and no other thing, you come to realize that what we call a 'being' or a 'person' is just the combination of these two things; mind and matter. Apart from mind and matter, there is nothing we can call a 'person' or a 'being'.

It is like a car. You always say you drive a car. But in reality a car does not exist, only the parts exist. If you take the parts one by one, you lose the car although there are still parts. If you put the parts in their respective places again, then you get a car. Actually what we call a car is non-existent. What is really existent in this simile is the parts. In the same way we call ourselves a 'being' or a 'person', but actually in the ultimate analysis there is no 'person' or no 'being', just mind and matter. We see this through our own experience, not because we have read a book or we attended the lecture or not because we just sit down and speculate. We see for ourselves through practice of Vipassanā meditation that every moment there are only these two things going on, mind and matter.

Sometimes the one that is noted is also mind. So sometimes mind is noting the other mind. Sometimes mind is noting matter. What is noted may be different at different moments. For example, when you are making notes of rising and falling, you are noting the matter. Then your mind goes out, then you see 'going out', 'going out'. Now you are noting the mind. The thing that is noted can be either matter or mind. But the thing that notes is always mind. Even

though your one mind is making notes of another mind, there is always the physical base which is dependent upon by the mind. Mind can arise only depending upon our body. For example seeing mind, there can be seeing mind only when we have the eyes. If we are blind, if we do not have eyes at all, there will be no seeing mind.

So mind in human beings, in animals, in some form of celestial beings is always dependent upon a physical bases. If there is no physical base, mind cannot exist by itself. When your one mind is noting another mind, that means they are depending upon physical base which is matter, in this case also mind and matter going on and on and on. In the same way when you walk, you make notes of lifting, moving, putting down. In that case also lifting the movement of the foot is matter and noting is mind. Again pushing forward is matter and noting is mind. And putting down is matter and noting is mind. So you see clearly that at the moment of lifting the foot and so on, there are these two things going on; mind and matter, mind and matter, mind and matter.

When you see mind and matter in this way, you do not see anything over and above mind and matter. You are said to gain a Right View and you are said to gain an understanding the objects as they are. That is the Right View or the Right Understanding you gain through your practice. This type of understanding cannot be gained through just reading or listening to a talk or just speculating. You have to practice and it is your own experience, your own understanding. When you see that there are mind and matter at moments, you are able to remove or abandon the wrong notion that you are a 'person' or you are a 'being' or you are a 'individual'.

When we talk, we cannot avoid using these terms 'I', 'You', or a 'person', or a 'being' because we live in the conventional world. We have to use conventional terms for the ease of communication, for the ease of usage. But in the ultimate sense there is no man, no woman, no being, no person, but just mind and matter. Or if we expand it a little, just five aggregates. This we come to realize through the practice of Vipassanā meditation, through constant observation of objects that are presented to us through the sense doors. When you reach this stage, just seeing mind and matter clearly and seeing that there are only mind and matter and nothing else, then you have entered into the ramp of Vipassanā or you have passed through the threshold of Vipassanā. The practice of Vipassanā is very rewarding. Just after sometime you come to the realization that there are only mind and matter. That means you discover something about the objects. Formerly you do not know about this objects.

Now you pay close attention to the objects. By constant observation, by the concentration you make discovery that what you thought to be a compact 'being', a compact 'individual' is actually just the combination of mind and matter. If mind is taken away from matter, matter taken away from mind, I cannot function as a 'being'. Mind and matter are compared to two persons: a cripple and a blind man. A blind man cannot go to his destination simply because he is blind and the cripple cannot go because he is crippled. If a cripple gets on the back of a blind man and then he gives directions like "make right turn", "make left turn" or "go straight", then they can both reach their destination.

In the same way mind and matter by themselves are without any action. Mind cannot go, mind cannot lift foot, mind cannot speak because it has no body. And the body by itself

without mind cannot do anything since it is like log wood. But when mind and matter come together, mind and body come together, now they are called a 'person' and they can function. This you come to realize through your own experience, not from another person, not because your teachers taught you this. Vipassanā knowledge is a real knowledge that come from within. And only Vipassanā knowledge that comes that is called a real understanding or a real wisdom.

This real wisdom we can attain through the practice of Vipassanā meditation or through the practice of observation, observation of the objects as they are presented to us. It is important that we pay attention to the object at the present moment so that we see the object clearly. When we see the object clearly, we know what it is. Now you make notes of 'rising' and 'falling', 'rising' and 'falling'. Along with rising and falling there is 'noting' and you may know the noting also. Your noting mind notes the objects. "Noting the objects" means your mind as it goes to the object or your mind as it inclines towards the objects. That is why it is called "mind". Mind or the Pāli word "nāma" means something that bends, something that inclines towards another thing. When you take an object in your mind, your mind goes to the objects or bends to the objects. That is why it is called "mind". so this is mind.

Then you watch rising and falling. Rising and falling has no cognitive power. They do not know anything, they are just matter. And this also you come to see through observation. That is you see what they are. After seeing what they are you will also see that will happen in a later stage, you will also see that they come and go, they do not last. Through this practice you can discover many things about yourself and many things about mind and matter, many things about the objects that are presented to you (us). That discovery is important because without that discovery of what mind is and what matter is and how they are related and so on, we cannot reach our destination, we cannot get enlightenment. That is why we have to practice Vipassanā meditation, we have to go through the stages of Vipassanā one by one. There is no skipping of those stages although some people may be able to go through these stages very fast. But however fast they go through, they have to go through all these stages.

So this is what we call knowing the knower and the known. When you know the knower and the known, I think there are three things, right?

The known,
the knower and
the knower of the knower.

You know that there is material thing and then the awareness of material thing, that is the knower. And then you know the knower that is aware of the material object. So you may see three things at that moment; what is known, what knows and then the knower of what knows. All these discoveries you make through the practice of Vipassanā meditation. Without Vipassanā meditation you cannot hope to see these realities of mind and matter.

If we do not see the realities of mind and matter, we cannot hope to progress along this path. And if we cannot make progress, we cannot get the true understanding of the Four Noble Truths. Or in other words, we cannot get enlightenment. The purpose of Vipassanā or the ultimate aim of Vipassanā is to get enlightenment or to achieve total purification of mind. The

function of Vipassanā is, as I said many times before, to see the true nature of things, to understand them fully. To understand them fully means to know what they are, to know they are impermanent and so on and to be able to abandon any wrong notions regarding the objects.

Once we understand fully these things, then the practice will carry itself towards reaching the goal. This is the seeing mind and matter is just the beginning of Vipassanā. So when you see mind and matter clearly, you are said to possess or you are said to attain the purity of Views.