

Understanding Reality

by Nina van Gorkom

Can we find true happiness in life? There are moments of happiness in our life but these do not last. Pleasant things we enjoy are susceptible to change, they do not last. We do not really see the impermanence of what is in ourselves and around ourselves, we always cling to what is actually impermanent. The pleasant and unpleasant events of our lives condition very much our feelings. We are slaves of the vicissitudes of life. One day we are praised and then we are glad. The next day we are treated unjustly and we are humiliated, and because of this we are sad. There are in turn gain and loss, fame and obscurity, praise and blame, bodily wellbeing and pain. These are the “eight worldly conditions” in our life. We read in the “Gradual Sayings” (Book of the Eights, Ch 1, § 6) that the Buddha spoke to the monks about the eight worldly conditions which obsess the world. He spoke with regard to those who have not attained enlightenment as follows:

... Monks, gain comes to the unlearned common average folk, who reflect not thus: “This gain which has come is impermanent, painful and subject to change.” They know it not as it really is. Loss comes... fame... obscurity... blame... praise... contentment... pain.... They reflect not that such are impermanent, painful and subject to change, nor do they know these conditions as they really are. Gain, loss and so forth take possession of their minds and hold sway there. They welcome the gain which has arisen; they rebel against loss. They welcome the fame which has arisen; they rebel against obscurity. They welcome the praise which has arisen; they rebel against blame. They welcome the wellbeing which has arisen; they rebel against pain. Thus given over to compliance and hostility, they are not freed from birth, old age, death, sorrows, lamentations, pains, miseries and tribulations. I say such folk are not free from ill.

We then read that for the “ariyan disciple”, who has attained enlightenment, the opposite is the case. We may wonder what the secret is of the ariyan disciple. He sees things as they really are and he is not enslaved to the worldly conditions. Could we also become an ariyan

disciple? At this moment we are still “unlearned, common, average folk”. From the Buddha’s teachings we learn that seeing realities as they are can make us less enslaved to the worldly conditions. Seeing things as they are, that is true wisdom. Do we see realities as they are or do we live in dreams and phantasies? In our life there are realities and there are imaginations or ideas we conceive in our mind. We do not even know the difference between reality and imagination. However, in order to see things as they really are we must know the difference between what is real and what is not real.

We may wonder whether the Buddha’s teaching is not a philosophical system which deals with abstractions. On the contrary, the Buddha’s teaching helps us to know ourselves, to know our different moments of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness. He taught the way to eradicate attachment, aversion and ignorance.

Our thinking about reality is conditioned by many ideas we acquired through our education and through the culture in which we are rooted. If we want to understand what the Buddha taught we should not hold on to our own ideas about reality and we should be open-minded to his teaching. Then we shall notice that his teaching is completely different from our ideas about reality.

The Buddha taught about everything which appears now and which can be directly experienced. He did not teach abstract ideas. What appears now? Is it attachment, aversion or ignorance? Or is it generosity or compassion? In our life there are wholesome moments and unwholesome moments and these change very rapidly. We do not have one consciousness or mind, but many different moments of consciousness. Moments of consciousness are realities, not imagination, and we can experience them now, at this moment, when they appear. Then we shall notice that there are many different moments of consciousness (in Pāli ¹: citta). When we, for example, perform a good deed there are wholesome moments of consciousness, but also unwholesome moments of consciousness may arise. Some slight stinginess may arise which we only know ourselves and which nobody else may notice. There may be attachment to the person to whom we give a gift, or there may be conceit. If we do not know when there is a wholesome moment of consciousness (kusala citta) and when there is an unwholesome moment of consciousness (akusala citta) how could we develop wholesomeness?

¹ Pāli is the original language of the scriptures of the old Theravāda tradition.

Through the development of right understanding of the different moments of consciousness we shall come to know our defilements and then we shall see that the cause of all sadness and misery is within ourselves and not outside ourselves.

What are realities and what are imaginations? We use words in our language in order to make ourselves understood. Sometimes a word represents something which is real, which can be directly experienced, and sometimes a word denotes an abstract idea. We must find out what the Buddha taught about reality, otherwise we shall continue to be ignorant of what occurs in ourselves and around ourselves. Then it will be impossible to eradicate our faults and vices and to be freed from our enslavement to the worldly conditions.

Moments of consciousness are not imagination, they are realities which can be experienced, now, at this moment. We can come to know our good and bad qualities when they appear. We have attachment and aversion with regard to what we experience through the eyes, the ears and through the other senses. Before attachment or aversion with regard to what we see can arise, there must be a moment of just seeing. Is there seeing at this moment? It can be experienced, it is a reality. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, the experience of tangible object through the bodysense and the experience of objects through the mind are realities, they are not imaginations. They are different moments of consciousness, each with their own characteristic. The Buddha spoke about realities which can be directly known and these are different from abstract ideas and imaginations.

Seeing is the experience of what presents itself through the eyes, of what is visible. Seeing is different from thinking about what we see, different from attachment. Seeing just sees. Hearing is the experience of what presents itself through the ears, of sound. Hearing is different from thinking about what we hear, such as someone's voice or the barking of a dog. Sound is a reality, it can be directly experienced; but sound itself does not experience anything, it is different from hearing. Tasting experiences flavour. Flavour can be directly experienced when it presents itself. Flavour itself does not experience anything, it is different from tasting.

In our life there are two kinds of realities:

the reality which knows or experiences something, nāma ,

the reality which does not know anything, rūpa.

Generosity, kindness, aversion, seeing or hearing are mental phenomena or nāma, they experience different objects. Sound, flavour, hardness, softness, heat or cold are physical phenomena or rūpa, they do not know anything.

Everything which is reality has its own inalterable characteristic, and when it presents itself it can be experienced through the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the bodysense and the “mind-door”, through these six doorways.

Nāma and rūpa are realities which each have their own unchangeable characteristic, they are real for everybody. The names of realities can be changed, but their characteristics are inalterable. Everything which is real has a characteristic which can be experienced through the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the bodysense or through the mind-door, through six doors. Hearing is hearing for everybody, everywhere. We can give hearing another name, but its characteristic cannot be changed. Sound is sound for everybody, everywhere. We can give sound another name but its characteristic cannot be changed. Attachment is attachment for everybody, aversion is aversion for everybody. We can change the names of realities, but their characteristics are inalterable. When realities present themselves, their characteristics can be experienced without having to think about them or to name them.

Generosity is a reality, it is nāma. We may be inclined to think that there is a person who is generous, that a self is generous, but generosity does not last. It is not self, only a kind of nāma which arises and falls away. Seeing is a reality, it is a kind of nāma. We think, “I see”, but seeing does not last, it is impermanent. Where is then the self? There is no person. What we take for a person are in reality only different nāmas and rūpas which arise and then fall away again.

We are full of wrong ideas about reality, we believe that a self sees and hears, that a self performs good deeds and bad deeds; the whole day there is clinging to a self. Wrong view about reality cannot lead to any good. So long as we believe in a self, attachment, aversion and ignorance cannot be eradicated and we shall always be enslaved to the eight worldly conditions of gain and loss, fame and obscurity, praise and blame, bodily wellbeing and pain.

There is no self who experiences something. Seeing sees, hearing hears, thinking thinks. What is the use of knowing this? It is essential to know that not a self but different moments of consciousness experience different objects. There can be only one moment of consciousness at a time and it experiences one object. We may be inclined to think that nāma can last for

a while. We may believe that thinking, for example, can last for some time. In reality there are many different moments of thinking and they think of only one object at a time. Can we think of more than one thing at a time? That is impossible. Seeing is a moment of consciousness and it experiences only one object: visible object. After seeing there can be thinking of what we have seen or there can be hearing, but these moments cannot arise at the same time. All these moments are different.

Nāma and rūpa are realities and they can be known when they appear. Ideas such as person, car or tree are not realities, they are real only in conventional sense. The Buddha taught that only one nāma or rūpa can be known at a time, when it presents itself through one of the six doors. We may understand this in theory, but now we have to verify it for ourselves. This is not easy, because we still cling to our own view of reality. Still, we can begin to develop understanding of the different realities which appear in our daily life.

Once I was having lunch with “Khun Sujin”, my good friend in the Dhamma, in a Chinese restaurant in Bangkok. I was served a duck’s foot and when I looked at it I had aversion. Khun Sujin said, “Just taste it, try it, without paying attention to the shape and form.” I tasted it without paying attention to the shape and form. The taste was good. At that time I did not understand yet the full meaning of Khun Sujin’s lesson, but she wanted to show me that the experience through the eyes is one thing, and the experience through the tongue quite another thing and thus another reality. We join all the different experiences together into a “whole” and we think: “I am eating a duck’s foot”. Duck’s foot is not a reality. What are the realities?

There is the experience of visible object,
 there is visible object,
 there is attention to shape and form, and this is different from seeing,
 there is aversion
 there is tasting, the experience of flavour,
 there is thinking of the flavour.

Thus we see that there are different mental phenomena, *nāma*, and physical phenomena, *rūpa*, and these can be known when they appear at the present moment. If we do not come to know *nāmas* and *rūpas* which appear one at a time, we believe that a duck's foot, a person, a house or a car are realities which exist. However, these things are ideas which are real in conventional sense, not real in the absolute or ultimate sense. *Nāma* and *rūpa* are ultimate realities, in Pāli: *paramattha dhammas*. It is essential to know the difference between what is real in conventional sense, a concept or idea we may think of, and what is real in the ultimate sense. Our life is *nāma* and *rūpa* which arise and fall away. When there is a clearer understanding of the different characteristics of *nāma* and *rūpa* which present themselves through the different doorways, there will be less confusion in our life and we shall gradually learn that there is no self.

When there is mindfulness of *nāma* and *rūpa* when they appear right understanding of them can be developed. There is no self who is mindful but it is "sati" which is mindful. Sati is a term in Pāli which can be translated as mindfulness, non-forgetfulness or awareness. Sati is a mental factor which accompanies each wholesome moment of consciousness. There are different kinds and degrees of sati. When we are generous there is sati which is non-forgetful of generosity. When we abstain from killing or other unwholesome actions, there is sati which prevents us from unwholesomeness. There is sati with the development of calm (tranquil meditation) which is mindful of the meditation subject. Sati in the development of insight or right understanding of realities has a different object: it is mindful, non-forgetful, of a *nāma* or *rūpa* which appears now. At that moment there is no notion of a "self" or something which exists, which lasts.

We cannot induce sati whenever we wish. Listening to the Dhamma and considering realities which appear can condition the arising of sati. We should have right understanding of the object of awareness: the reality which appears now, which is either *nāma* or *rūpa*, and we should remember that only one reality appears at a time.

We are inclined to join many realities together into a "whole". I thought that I could see a duck's foot, and I failed to understand that seeing is different from thinking and different from tasting. One cannot see a duck's foot, seeing sees only what appears through the eyes, colour or visible object. Thinking can think of the idea or concept of a duck's foot. Thinking itself is a kind of *nāma*, it is a reality, and sati can be mindful of thinking. The concept of which we think is not a reality and thus it cannot be object of mindfulness.

We cannot expect there to be many moments of sati in the beginning. Sati is non-forgetful of the reality which appears now, through one of the six doors, and at that moment understanding of that reality can develop. That kind of understanding is direct understanding of the reality which appears and it is different from theoretical understanding. The development of direct understanding of realities is the development of insight (*vipassanā*) as taught by the Buddha. It can only develop very gradually, during many lives.

Insight will eventually lead to the detachment from the idea of self. We learn that what we used to take for self are in reality many different elements, *nāmas* and *rūpas*, which can be known when they appear. My husband and I had been invited to a restaurant where it was very cold. I had aversion towards cold and I was inclined to say something about it. But that would have been impatience and lack of consideration for our host and hostess. I considered that the *nāmas* and *rūpas* which arise are beyond our control. They arise when there are conditions for their arising. We always think that a self or a person can be master of *nāma* and *rūpa*. Sometimes it seems that we can, but it is not so in reality. The experience of bodily wellbeing or pain belongs to the eight worldly conditions which we are not master of. The Buddha taught us to develop right understanding of the realities which are already appearing in daily life, no matter whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, wholesome or unwholesome. Sati can arise wherever we may be, in our daily life. Also when we do not feel well or when we are cold there are realities appearing, and these can be objects of mindfulness. For example, if there can be a moment of mindfulness of only cold when it appears, there is at that moment no notion of “my feet which are cold” or “the cold draught”, which are not realities but only concepts. After a moment of sati there will again be attachment, aversion and ignorance, but a moment of sati is never lost. Sati falls away, but it can condition a moment of sati again, later on.

We are affected by gain and loss and the other worldly conditions, but through the development of right understanding of *nāma* and *rūpa* there will be less ignorance about the events of our life. Slowly but gradually we can come to see that our life is *nāma* and *rūpa* and that whatever happens has to happen because of the appropriate conditions, that it is beyond control.