

## **PRACTICING SATI**

*Transcription of a dharma talk given by Victor Byrd  
at our Seven Day Retreat in Temecula, CA - June 8, 2004*

So last night we talked about a call to destiny and renunciation, and I remembered later that Rajneesh had a very funny line about renunciation; he said that it's very egotistical of us to think that we can renounce the world. I mean, the world's a very big thing, and we are a very little thing! I Am Going To Renounce The World. The next step would be, to renounce the Universe. Right? So the truth is, the world is not what we renounce. We renounce our attachment. We renounce our desire and our clinging for the goodies of the world. The meditation teachers, the scriptures of yoga, samkhya, vedanta as well as Buddhism, and the Buddha said it over and over. You are the world. You can't renounce yourself. You are the world. This body, if you think of it as a drop in the ocean, is the same thing, the same makeup of the entire ocean. If you have healed "this" world, in some ways you have healed the world.

And that's a pretty wonderful thing to aspire to. Rather than running away from our selves, and running out and trying to save the world, going to the poor heathen countries and trying to save all the ignorant people, which is a sure-fire way not to save anything.

But if you have saved yourself - you remember we were talking about the attitude of sitting with the rescue of the heart and mind - what's the problem? What problem is left? What would the world even look like to a being that was no longer lost in delusion? I don't know. I'm not ready to renounce yet! To see what it looks like. So, in this list of the journey, of the spiritual journey (in psychological terms we call it the journey of individuation), there's the call - the feeling of conviction - the call to destiny, and then there's the renunciation.

So the third, is the struggle. And certainly, can't we relate to the third one right here? Is any struggle going on in a seven day retreat? There's the renunciation, we've left the world, we've left lots of comfort behind. And then we're here doing the work, and that's called the struggle.

So in relation to working with the hindrances, I don't think there's a better subject to jump into on the second evening than the subject of sati, or mindfulness. It is said that after the Buddha died, Ananda, who was his personal attendant, said that from then on mindfulness was his best friend.

Let mindfulness be my best friend. Those are truly wise words. Mindfulness is the guardian that keeps us from getting lost in the falling out of the sense doors. Falling out of our eyes, our ears, grabbing on to what we connect to, grabbing on and clinging. Mindfulness is the guardian that keeps us from getting lost, and again my problem with the word mindfulness is that it doesn't capture the mystery. .you know, we use the word mindfulness quite loosely in English. I was mindful of doing this or that, but it doesn't capture the mystery and the power of what sati is. And I thought we would just talk a little about sati tonight. What it is. And I thought that the best way to begin would be to go over the beginning of the sutra - sutta - the mindfulness sutta, maybe some of you have not heard the Satipattana sutta.

So this is the way the Buddha introduced the subject of sati. It's really something. He said "the only way" - he didn't say "a" way or a certain way - he said the only way that leads to the attainment of purity, to the overcoming of grief, to the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, to the end of pain, to the entering upon the right path and the realization of nirvana is the four foundations of mindfulness. I told you yesterday you could also say the four abidings in mindfulness. In some ways that captures the flavor of it. "Foundations" doesn't really quite get it. There's not really a good English translation of the Pali word.

The Buddha even once talked about the four pastures, like a cow grazing in four different pastures, as a way of describing the areas of mindfulness. So we're safe in those pastures as long as we're sticking to those areas. But let's think of it, if you don't mind, as abiding in four areas of mindfulness. And again, I would prefer if we just said, abiding in sati. Sati.

So then he goes on and he says, there the disciple lives in contemplation of the body, in contemplation of the feelings, in contemplation of the mind, and in contemplation of the phenomena. The literal word is "dharma," contemplation of the dharma with a little "d" not a big "D." And what that actually means is "objects," all objects of phenomena are little dharmas. So in other words, what the fourth area is talking about is whatever object is in your mind, whatever is in your mind presently is the fourth area.

The third one would be more the mind itself, the mind state. The mind full of greed, the mind full of peace, that would be the third foundation, the mind that is full of calmness, that is the third. So if we are sitting and someone is trying to discern what is the mind state, that is the third foundation or the third abiding.

Then, he begins with the body, after he has listed the four abidings, he begins with the body. And he says this is the place that we have to begin. We have to begin with the body, the material. And once we have that one down, we have most of it knocked. And I think that is really true. If you think about it, we are certainly in our heads all the time. We leave the body constantly. We lose awareness that there is a body. We leave awareness that there are sensations.

So he says, "How does a disciple dwell in contemplation of the body? There the disciple retires to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to a solitary place. He sits down, with body erect, legs crossed, and with mindfulness fixed before him, (or with sati fixed before her). So what does that mean, "with sati fixed before him?" Some people have said that it actually refers to the tip of the nose, or even the "rise and fall." It is referring to the practice of the sensation of the breath coming into the nose or the rise and fall of the belly. But no one knows what that means. There's just speculation what he meant, "with mindfulness fixed before him." You could say that it means that you are establishing that agenda. You all know that I'm fond of asking what is on the front burner? So in a sense that might be a way of thinking about it. (Placing sati on the front burner).

But the other way that I think we can think about it is literally. The idea of mindfulness gazing back rather than the idea of the way that we are always gazing out. We are always going outward. The eyes look out, the ears look out. Everything is oriented to the external. Mindfulness is oriented to watching our selves watch the outside. Maybe the Buddha was really able to do that. I play with it, and it's very interesting. You can feel a tug. The eyes will want to pull you, even with the eyes closed, there will be this tug between creating the space where you are looking back at yourself, and then slipping back into this idea that you are inside looking out. Even with the eyes closed. So if your eyes are closed and you start thinking, is that internal or external? I mean, if you are thinking, aren't you looking from the inside out at a thought? I don't think that's internal, really. It's an object. I look outside with my eyes at Michael, but I can close my eyes and still see Michael. So does it become internal just because I close my eyes? I don't think so. I think it is actually still external, it's just again what is meant by the fourth foundation: the object in the mind. So, what is it like to be able to create this spaciousness so that there is this experience of looking back at yourself. I wonder. I'm just making this up, but I don't know if anyone has ever really described just what he meant about "fixing sati in front of him or her."

I wanted to share with you a thought that I had about it. As a therapist, I'm kind of interested in the way we have pathological descriptions of the way the mind works when it is in trauma. You've heard of dissociation. People can have a terrible experience. Children can experience terrible sexual abuse, and they will swear that they were on the ceiling looking down at the scene. And you know, we hear that, and don't we kind of believe it? We don't think that they are making it up. We don't think that when people are saying that "I had this sense that I was outside, looking back at myself" and people have the experience in surgery, that's not uncommon, the experience of watching the doctor.

Well, maybe that's sati. Maybe that's what sati is. In other words, it can be experienced in profound moments of trauma. And certainly you wouldn't be thinking of that as a meditation, a wonderful meditation. But just think about it. Suddenly, something has come in and taken care of you. It has removed you from something that is too painful to bear. And, I don't think anyone would say with an experience like that their ego was on the ceiling. No one would say it was their ego that was there as they were lying on

the table during the surgery. It is clearly an egoless experience.

So, I think that you could build a very strong argument that sati is built into our DNA. Sati is this possibility of experiencing reality beyond an ego based process. That's amazing! Think about that. That's a very very big deal. That's the wedge that we talk about. That's the very wedge that we talk about, and that we somewhat, without trying to grasp and grab for it, but that is the work that we are doing here. To create the possibility of sati. So we're not working - I don't know if this is going to sound strange - we're not working to be mindful, because I don't think that's possible! I really don't. I don't think it's possible. I think there is some arrogance to that.

If mindfulness, if sati, is an experience that is not ego based, then who is going to be walking around talking about how mindful they were? The ego is saying, "well I've been mindful all day long. I was just noting everything" Right? And that's an excellent thing. It's an excellent thing. It's all we can do; we can't do better than that. But I think that when you start owning the experience, as if "why yeah, I was really mindful. This afternoon my mindfulness was stronger than it was in the morning." When you are owning that without the humility of saying, "you know, that was just my personality noting. That was just Victor lifting up his foot and saying, "lifting, lifting, lifting. Moving, moving moving. Placing. It was Victor saying "this body is moving."

That was not an egoless experience. An egoless experience, friends, is called anatta. It's called no-self. It's the big leagues. It is a moment of stream entry. To truly experience anatta is to enter the stream. So it seems to me that the good news is that - well, it could be kind of discouraging if you walk around feeling "well I've done everything I could and I've been mindful all day long, and I'm not one bit different." You know? And that could be discouraging. But if you have the attitude, "well of course! I am working on this muscle of mindfulness, and I've been trying real hard, although I accept that that is not sati. I wasn't on the ceiling looking at myself walking." And I don't mean to suggest that that would be what it would be like. I do think though that he has given us a clue when he said that. Sitting in a solitary place, with an erect position and with mindfulness, with sati fixed before you.

With sati fixed before you. You begin. Whatever. Sitting or standing or walking. You could have said, lying down in bed at night, with sati fixed before me. Going to the bathroom, with sati fixed before me. One of the things that I have noticed that has been kind of fun, and I'm beginning to stop myself now, but I'll go to the little basket and see notes, and there's not mindfulness. All those notes, and maybe there's a cookie in there! It's so funny. And the greed. It's like, "Oh! Something interesting." So I've done it now for a day and a half, I'm beginning to get it now. So I'm stopping now, with sati fixed before me. Does that mean that that activity is sati? No. It does not. It means that my ego is trying to be mindful, which is good. Very Very good.

But if you could walk around tonight and tomorrow and the next day, and if I could walk around with the humility of not pretending that we are in sati, for heavens sake. We're exercising. We're trying to build a muscle, we're trying to build a container

which would hold sati. Which would allow it to be. And that would be an amazing thing. If you are experiencing sati, it is a moment of enlightenment. Even one second. It was a moment of enlightenment. Because the ego was not there. There is no way to be experiencing sati from the ego. It's not possible because the ego is the thing that says "I'm doing it. I'm doing it." It says it relentlessly, doesn't it? It's what the ego says. "I am." The ego says, "I am sitting. I am hearing." Now the ego is convinced that it is listening to a dharma talk. It's just sure of it. It's sitting there on its cushion, hearing a dharma talk. "I'm hearing a dharma talk." Sati wouldn't, because sati doesn't speak number one, but number two it certainly doesn't say "I."

There's a fleeting moment, just a fleeting moment, every once in a while, you can be walking and someone appears on the visual screen, and you just see it as a visual image: It's something. It is really something, and it just disappears. You have not projected you out onto that object, your sense of self onto another self. It's just an image on the visual screen. What happens is we perceive an image, which would be the third aggregate - perception - we're going to go over the five aggregates tomorrow night, but then it goes to number four which is you have a story about it. "Oh, I know her! I like her. Oh, I know her, I don't like her."

There's a perception that's just a perception on the visual screen, but then it goes into number four, and you build a story about it. And then there's a person there. Now this is not to say that there's not a person out there. I'm not trying to say that. But I am trying to say that we can't really get to that because we go so fast from this seeing an object to going to the story about it. There's not even a split second when we are not doing that.

So he said that you sit erect and fix sati before you, and were talking about these things: about the erect posture, and we were talking about the question, "why am I sitting?" The attitude of rescue...sitting to rescue the heart and mind. And number three, fixing sati before you. And then you're ready to start. The idea of rescuing your self is pretty alien to us in the West. We're not supposed to rescue ourselves. It's ridiculous. God is supposed to save us. Somebody has to save us. But we're not really supposed to save ourselves. That is perhaps the main thing that the Buddha said. It's got to be in the top three, and it's really something. He said, "it's up to you. You're on your own and it's up to you!" Buddhas come into the world to point. To point. But we have to walk the path. It is our job to walk the path, and that I think certainly fits into the heroic idea of the journey. Why are you sitting? You're sitting to rescue yourself. That seems to me to be the most wonderful thing. We're sitting to rescue ourselves.

Most of you have heard me say in relation to therapy that the single most damaging mind state for a person trying to change is this fantasy of rescue from outside. It is amazing, and it's perfectly normal. So we wait for the therapist, the therapist becomes Mom and Dad, or whatever. But it's like we have this incredibly tenacious little child inside who is not going to budge. It's not moving. It's not going to move until Mommy or Daddy or somebody comes and rescues it.

That's so normal; that it is universal: the fantasy of rescue from the outside. So when we're sitting on a cushion, who's going to rescue you? Is it the fantasy that enlightenment maybe it's going to come to us? It's something about our willingness to accept this responsibility of rescuing ourselves.

So then he goes on, and it's interesting. This is the way he goes to the first aspect of working with the body. It always surprises me. And then he's going to go on and talk about the four abidings: the body, the feelings, the mind, and phenomena. We're not going to worry about that, we'll probably continue with this tomorrow. "With mindfulness fixed," with sati fixed before her, let's be gender correct here, OK? "With sati fixed before her, she breathes in, with sati she breathes out. When making a long inhalation, she knows "I make a long inhalation." When making a long exhalation, she knows, "I make a long exhalation." When making a short inhalation, he knows "I make a short inhalation." When making a short exhalation he knows, "I make a short exhalation."

Clearly perceiving the entire breath body. The entire breath body, I will breathe out. Thus he trains himself. Calming the bodily function, I will breathe in. Thus he trains himself. Calming this bodily function, I will breathe out. Thus he trains himself. Most people, when they talk about what the Buddha's practice was, in terms of his enlightenment, from what I have read, most people say that this was his practice. It's called anapanasati, sati to breathing, mindfulness of breathing.

But it's very interesting, he doesn't say, "breathing in I noted" or breathing out I noted" short or long, he said, "I knew." He just simply said that there was knowing. So you can get into a lot of arguments about the idea of a verbal note or not a nonverbal note. There are a lot of vipassana traditions that absolutely do not agree with a verbal note, and then there are, of course, other disciplines that emphasize it. So you have to discover for yourself what works, but it's the 'fixed sati' that is looking and knowing that it is a long inhalation throughout the entire body. And then it's a short inhalation, or a long exhalation.

And what is meant by the breath body? If you get into more powerful states of concentration, you begin to experience the breath as having the shape of the body. And you can feel it. You don't have this sense of solidity. You have this sense of space that's filled with the breath. So it makes a lot of sense that he calls it the breath body. It's a body that is lighter than the physical, but it's still a body. It's the breath body.

So then he says that you can meditate, contemplate either internally or externally. So as we sit, as we're sitting here today, there are other bodies as well as our own. So you could look out and know that you are seeing another body. Or you could look out and know that you are experiencing the sensation of a body here, and you are realizing that there is another body that has those sensations also.

We don't do that do we? Usually, we look at and see a personality. It's very hard to look out. I look out and see Barbara. I don't see a body. I see Mark. I don't see a

body. Do you? But isn't that interesting, because it's telling you something about the ego. The ego is denying the body. "I'm not a body!" Except when it's sick. When the body's sick, then the ego is moaning and groaning because it becomes a body very quickly. In other words it's a very profound meditation to be staying with materiality, with matter, with staying in your experience of sensation and looking out and knowing that that is what you are seeing outside also. A body. You're seeing a body. You really are. But isn't that odd? I want to be seeing Cali. That's Cali, that's not a body. It's Cali. It's not a thing.

It's a very intense and powerful meditation to be abiding in the awareness of a physical body that is there. This body is breathing. That's obvious. So when you look across the room are you really experiencing that what you are seeing is a body breathing? We are. We are.

What is it that makes us so confused? That this body is me? It's the second aggregate: feeling. We're processing thousands of little moments of sensation, pain etc. So there is the form of the body that we can see. The eyes can look and see a body. The eyes are part of the body. But it's the inside, the experience of the feelings that is so confusing, so confusing. Because we have identified with the feelings and then we are really lost in the content.

Sati would not be doing that. Sati would not be identifying with the feelings. Sati would be the knowing that there are sensations.

When I sat in May, one of the things that I had seduced myself into thinking was that I was still practicing sati. And I realized that I wasn't. I would get up in the morning and do it a while. But I have this "gift" of being able to sit in a lot of tranquility and bliss, and sati just disappears. That's the downside of developing concentration at the expense of sati. Because the scriptures all say that all of the bliss in the world, all of the tranquility in the world, no matter how powerful the state of your mind, it will not "take you over." It will not take you over from this world that we live in to the unconditioned. The only thing that will go into nirvana is wisdom. Wisdom is the only thing that will go over. Nothing else. So wisdom is not developed by great concentration. That's sati. Sati is the door into wisdom.

So the suggestion that I want to make is that we practice a little humility. The idea that sati is our best friend. In other words, having the attitude that sati is so astonishing. It's like "shooting for the moon." Aspiring to reach a distant star. And yet it's possible! But the only way that we can work toward it is to do the grunge work. The grunge work of stopping before you reach the basket with the note, and realizing: Ah. Lost again. Lost again. Lost again. Reaching for the door - mindlessly. Going to the bathroom - mindlessly. When does the practice of sati begin in the morning? At what moment from when you wake up, first wake up, your eyes open, when do you start? When do you start practicing? Is it when you come to the cushion? That wouldn't be so skillful. The Buddha suggests that it should start the moment you wake up, the moment you open your eyes. The first thing that you would be able to note would be

“awake.”

What I discovered as I went through the weeks was that each week sati got stronger, because I was finally admitting that I was being really lazy. But I didn't even know I was being lazy at first. I didn't even know. So when I was able to see that it was wonderful. I never beat myself up, because I'm always thrilled that I've learned something, and I know that I can go on.

I think that you all are aware by now that nobody has more critical eyes than I do. And I watch, and it's amazing. I see the difference in your personality in this room and the outside room. It's amazing. The form of your body changes as you walk away. Maybe the feeling is that you can now relax a little, I don't know. But it's important to remember that the practice of sati is everywhere. It's not just on the cushion. It's everywhere.

The ego despises the relentlessness of that. It despises it, and I think that it feels suffocated, and I think it gets frightened. (Are you nodding? Nodding yes?) I think that the truth is that it's a very scary thing.

So the ego will say - this is what the ego is secretly saying, although you might not have heard it - “OK. I'll do sati! I'll do sati as long as I am in charge of when we do it. If I'm in charge of when we do it, I'll do it good! I'll really do it. I'll do it strong.” But you see, you've made a deal with the devil there, because you're not going to win anything with that deal.

And I think that's what is so oppressive about a Vipassana retreat with the Burmese teachers. They ain't having any of it. You go in to an interview and say, “you know I had this blissful experience,” and they say, “did you note it?” I saw a vision!” “Did you note it?” That's all they say! “Did you note it?” And you know, if you're longing for a little compliment, you are not going to get it. The idea is that you must be relentless. You must be relentless in your practice. That is an admission of the situation as it really is.

If you were drowning, how relentless would you be to try to save yourself? Grabbing for something to hold on to, grabbing for a limb. You've fallen off of a bridge and you are drowning and you see a limb floating. How relentless would you be about getting to the limb? The water would be splashing in all directions, wouldn't it? And the relentlessness of it would come from an absolutely accurate appraisal of the situation as it is.

But you know, we're not in that situation here! Who's drowning? I'm not, are you? I'm not drowning. Who's drowning? The situation here is that we've got time. Nobody in here is going to die soon. Right? We've got lots of time: fifteen, twenty, twenty five years, thirty. But that's the mind set. The mind says, “Well I've got time, so let me take it easy here. I'll do this sati stuff, but let me ease into it. So I'm going to start tomorrow, because Victor's dharma talk was really impressive. I really liked it.

He has convinced me that I need to ratchet this up tomorrow, so you know, I'm going to try for twenty five percent tomorrow. I'll do that tomorrow. But tonight I've got things to do. I didn't get enough sleep last night, and I need my rest."

It's true. I know it's true. You can tell that I seem to have an intimate acquaintance with it! I didn't read this in a book. I mean it's true. The ego is always negotiating tomorrow. "Well, yeah, I'm going to. He's right. And I'm going to get right on that tomorrow. I'm going to write that down in my journal!"

So I just encourage everybody not to be seduced by yourself. The ego that is each of us is ancient. It's not 63 years old, 39, 28. The ego is thousands of years old. It knows every trick known to man. "Hey, you want spiritual? I'll do spiritual." It can morph into every possible form. So we are contending with something that is ancient and absolutely brilliant. Beyond imagination. Beyond imagination, with no intention of giving up control. Remember what Chogyam Trungpa said, our only hope is to wear it out like an old shoe.

So I used to play the organ in a little church in Harlem, very poor and "high," with chanting and incense. You couldn't even see in there, we had so much incense burning. Most of the people were from the Islands - Jamaica and other places - and they were really into it. They were into the real stuff. So we were kind of "gospel high." And so, I played the best Blessed Assurance you've ever heard. "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine. Oh what a foretaste of glory divine." I played it really good, and the walls were rocking. So the other day, thinking about this talk I wrote a new version of Blessed Assurance:

Mindfulness practice, this is the way.  
Conscious intention all through the day.  
Tasting and touching, seeing and smell,  
Lost in the content we're bound for hell.

Mindfulness practice, this is my song.  
Conscious intention all the day long.  
Mindfulness practice, don't ever stop,  
Until you hear delusion go POP!