

Realisation is in the *Citta*

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Sometimes people know the Dhamma but they don't have realisations; they know the theories but don't feel or experience the Truth. We work with the teachings and the practices, so that we have realisations. But where do realisations take place? Although they can be expressed in words, the experience of realisation is a shift in view; it's something other than a thought.

Realisation is an affective experience. One is stopped, or moved, or illuminated. And it happens in the place of affect, the mind-base, 'heart,' or *citta*. One feels things, realises things, and recognizes things in the *citta*. The *citta* is the mind that which is trapped, confused, restless, stuck; and when it is released from those experiences the *citta* realises and is liberated. *Citta* is the aspect of mind that's conditioned or stirred into action by feeling (*vedana*) and perception (*sañña*) – images, meanings, memories and impressions. Pleasure and pain catch it, and perception, the 'meaning,' gets it going. The *citta* then responds with impulses, or intentions. So this mind, rather than the organ of reason, is the place where inclination and purpose, good or bad arise.

Perception has to do with the meaning of things, the way things are held, the significance of things. For example, when I say the word 'uncle' you might get a mental image of some friendly old chap with a pipe. Something happens to bring up that image. It's a memory. That's *sañña*. But perception also has to do with things that are not just memory events. It includes impressions we have of ourselves and what we should be; impressions that are based on moods and aspirations rather than events. And these change in different situations. Under certain circumstances, for example, we may perceive ourselves as being rather foolish. Under other conditions, we might see ourselves in more positive ways – as being a nice person, someone who tries hard and gives a lot of himself or herself. All of this occurs in the *citta*.

There's a difference between knowing things intellectually and knowing them in the *citta*. Intellectually, for example, we can say, 'Oh, I make mistakes, but basically I'm a good man. I do good things.' But that isn't necessarily how we feel about ourselves; we can have a less articulate sense of doubt or unworthiness, which the intellect can't shift, because the intellect doesn't hold the meaning of things. That's held in the *citta*.

The meaning is a sensitivity that is affected by how the mind is now, or by how it has been trained to perceive – dogs as loveable or dirty for example – and it can be prejudiced in terms of racial, nationalistic or gender bias. It also is biased in terms of feeling – pleasure and pain. For example, intellectually you might know that smoking kills, is expensive, dirty, disgusting, addictive and nasty. But if you really like cigarettes, if they give you pleasure, you will still reach for one, ‘Oh, I’ve got to have a cigarette to calm down a bit!’ So it can be difficult to reason with the *citta*, because it goes towards the established perception, or towards the feeling of pleasure and towards the images and impressions of where we can find that. The delusion is that though a taste, sight, sound etc may have given us pleasure in the past, but that doesn’t mean it’s always going to be there. So this can be a big source of disappointment and confusion – particularly in terms of human relationships.

The arising of pleasure in the mind isn’t from an external source, but from the internal perception and feeling. So fantasies can trigger more pleasure than actual events, and grudges and fears over what happened years ago, or may never happen at all can move and even obsess us. This internal source is more powerful than the external, because it’s right there within us. So even when our reasoning says something is not good for us, something pulls us that way anyway. This *citta* is the wildest critter in the West. But it can be trained, through clear observation, reflection on how things are, and through meditation.

Citta is also where the deeply held sense of ‘I am’ lives. It holds the empirical experience of self as the storehouse of impressions of the past and the agent of future action. It’s such an important place that no wonder it becomes central and ‘me.’ So, in order to live meaningfully, we want to be surrounded by things that make us feel that things are good, purposeful, and useful. There’s a hunger to find and to rest upon something that’s stable, permanent or lasting, and that hunger for being latches onto feeling and perception. We look around, are affected, and build up meanings and associations. But what we’re affected by is an emotive and sensitive experience; and it can only come alive in the present moment. We can’t store it up. Therefore we have to keep regenerating good feeling by remembering or revisiting the site until the resonance starts again. We are always seeking some permanent, pleasurable resonance – a friendly dog, a pleasant place to live, useful things to do, nice company, holidays, new clothes. The idea is to keep some pleasant tonal quality going. But then

holes appear, don't they? The dog dies, things break down, people let us down, things we want aren't available, and we make mistakes – and then that lovely, pleasant quality has a hole in it. We can lead good, skilful and helpful lives, lives that are worthy of respect, and yet when that tonal quality changes, when somebody gets offended or something doesn't work out, we feel that what we do is a useless, waste of time, or that we never get it right. Affected by the disagreeable, that also gets to be taken as permanent and a reflection of who I am.

In other words, when the *citta* is not realised or freed, it weaves the trap of permanence and autonomy around the sense of self. And this 'I am' becomes our organizer – 'What am I going to do? Where am I going to go? Who am I? What will I be?' Then instead of being a central location to manage the flow, self tries to become a permanent entity, and obstructs the flow with its pre-conceptions, fears, assumptions and impulsiveness.

All that activity is in order to establish the sense of 'I am' on a continuing level of coherence and stability, agreeableness and fluency. But it's not a satisfactory exercise because, of course, things change and life is unpredictable. Meanwhile those internal meanings that the *citta* stores up of what is good and needed and to be feared and so on which seem to be permanent and lasting are actually just re-created out of the mechanism of perception. We continually imagine our reality. So that fantasy, built out of nostalgia, hope, fear and hunger is what lasts, lingers, and stays the longest. And it's held in the sense of 'I am.' Something in us doesn't want to let go of the story of I am, no matter how dismal, because it gives some kind of permanence.

Isn't that alarming? What lasts, lingers, and stays the longest are things that are stuck, things that are held, and there's a need to hold on that limits our freedom and ability to grow. Things can be flowing along, but then something unfortunate or unpleasant, or some experience that we haven't been able to resolve, strikes us most vigorously. We can stay with that for days, weeks, months! People can hold grudges, or be held in trauma for a lifetime. Stuff sticks because the *citta* is sticky. Then these stuck places, the unconscious attachments, get to be so basic that they seem like 'me.' And because that attachment, that unresolved residue, isn't something I'm consciously doing, it seems to be what I am. So it's that stickiness which gives rise to an identity is what we need to, and can, address.

Our usual daily life activity tends to distract us from doing this. Sometimes we're not even that clear about what is sticking or stuck, or what we really feel. When we meditate, when we put other activities aside, we meet these things head on. Meeting the residues of the past can be quite disturbing. It can also be somewhat of a shock to feel how ragged and wayward the mind can be; and the awkward stuff that it keeps dancing away from. We may barely recognize loneliness or the need for love because as soon as we get close to these feelings, our attention goes some place else so we don't have to be with them. Or we can get overwhelmed with perception and feeling so that we get lost in the grief, the sadness, whatever. Then a sense of impotence or powerlessness comes up.

Right there in the core of the unresolved 'I am', is the black hole of powerlessness or impotence. When it comes to our stuck or unresolved places, the more we are drawn into them – trying to control or manage them – the more we meet our helplessness. That's the single most, abiding ingredient of what is permanent and self. The powerlessness lives right in the heart of the difficulty, a place where we don't normally go, the place where angels fear to tread. We may be helpless to help others; there may be the sense of 'I'm not much good here. I can't do this thing. I can't make it work.' Or it can be 'These stupid habits! How do I cut them off? How do I get out of this?'

'I am' is trying to pull out of difficulty, which is why it busies itself so much. But 'I am' is the difficulty! And it responds to its need and helplessness by getting busy, blaming, going to sleep, or skittering away. That action gives it some illusory power. The easiest thing to get busy with is thinking – planning and thinking about myself, thinking about my future, remembering my past, rehashing what I did or could have done, figuring out what I will do, wondering what other people think of me and what I think about them. Meanwhile we become distracted from the really beneficial process of penetrating and releasing the *citta* from stickiness (otherwise known as 'clinging').

For release the mind has to fully take on the impressions, meanings and implications of Dhamma. In this, in the Buddha's teaching, it's impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self that have to be fully realised in the *citta*. We have to come out of that idea of permanence that the *citta* is attuned to, so that it will give up clinging. Most of us can accept impermanence as an idea. 'Leaves fall off trees, my granny's dead. Yeah, I can handle that. I'm a bit sad, but I can manage that.' As an idea, it's easy

to see. But to experience and know that everything you are is just sand dripping through an egg-timer – well, your whole sense of identity just goes whoosh! It's unpalatable. That which is impermanent is just that which is undependable, isn't it? There's no security in it and that's not so easy to take.

Hence the inner chatter and nervous jangle. But even silence and stillness are just another series of perceptions that I have, am or can achieve. They're helpful for weaning us off the jangly and abrasive stuff; then the mind can acquire inner confidence, clarity and strength. So meditative calm is useful, necessary I'd say. But in itself it's not the way out of perception. So where is that?

You might say it begins with an acknowledgement that 'I am' is a changing locus, a tent through which all kinds of experiences pass. Meditation brings the awareness of that to the fore. Then as that quality of witnessing gives us confidence and calm, we can allow the experiences to speak for themselves and be known as they are. And yes, they change. So what good is that? Well, it's a matter of where you 'realise' that fact. Impermanence and unsatisfactoriness are easy enough to understand intellectually. Things are fundamentally fragile, breakable. But the whole process has to be felt and lived through at the level of *citta*. We have to feel our way into it, so that we can also feel where the resonances, the quiet delight the sense of uplift and conviction. And as the *citta* gets more confident and clear, it acknowledges that these subtle perceptions and feelings also are just mist that moves. They're not wrong, but they don't finally satisfy. It's marvellous that as the *citta* steadies, it can sense that whatever moves is just mist; then the mind can drop its fascination with perception.

But you've got to lead the *citta* through the experience. Then you really get it; and that's when the attachments fall away. For example, there's a wonderful story in the texts that involves a woman named Kisagotami. Her baby had died and she was out of her mind with grief. She went to the Buddha and said, 'You're a holy man, can you do something about this?' He said, 'Yes, I can do something for you. If you get me a mustard seed I can solve your problem. Anybody can give you a mustard seed, but you need to get it from a home where nobody has died.' So of course, Kisagotami went down to the village to complete her task. At the first home she asked for the mustard seed. 'Mustard seed? We've got plenty of them. Here.' But then she asked, 'Has anybody died here?' 'Yes, Uncle died last

week,' they replied. 'Mmm,' she said. 'Thank you very much,' and off she went to the next family. 'I'm seeking a mustard seed, but has anybody died here?' 'Yes, my sister passed away just three weeks ago.' And so the story went – on and on.

Can you see what was happening? The Buddha was helping her lead the *citta* through the experience again and again and again. Finally, she got it. She went back to the Buddha and said, 'Let's bury my baby.'

You can see the wisdom of this teaching. The Buddha didn't say, 'Well, everybody dies. If your baby has died, that's the way it is.' This is true but the *citta* doesn't learn that way. That's just an idea. In order to understand, you have to feel your way through experience.

There's quite a bit in that, because often we don't tune into our 'dead babies' very well – by which I mean the old bits of our personal world that we're hanging onto. We don't feel the feeling in the feeling; feel the grief in the grief, the disappointment in the disappointment, or the irritation in the irritation. We may get to the edge of it but then we may think, 'Oh, how do I get over this? How do I change this?' The sense of 'I am' doesn't want to accept things as they are. It says, 'Quick! I don't want this messy hole I'm in. I don't want to touch it. What I want is the other side of it. I want to leap over the top of this experience and get to the solution, the answer. I want to feel good right now.' It doesn't want to go through that process of handling or tuning into that which is painful, disappointing, disempowering. It doesn't want to feel the places where we feel helpless.

This is why the process is arduous. We can be working with it for a long time. We have to tune into what's happening in our *citta* with its losses and crazy impulses – and sense that there's some purpose in doing that. Just being able and willing to tune in rather than turn to something else is a huge step in our maturation. We need to acknowledge the bit of us that wants to face the truth, however upsetting that may be. We need to acknowledge the inclination to wake up, the inclination towards truth.

Where does that come from? It doesn't come because somebody tells us we should wake up. Our interest in freedom also comes from the *citta*! As well as our determination, courage and compassion. So this affective mind, this heart or spirit is both challenging, and a spiritual resource – though its spiritual drive may not be that conscious. Sometimes it takes a crisis, or a blessing, a gift of grace, to reveal it.

This inclination to truthfulness, to waking up, often gets pushed off to one side; it doesn't take centre stage. We tend not to acknowledge it, to give it top billing. We need to turn this around, to pull that quality very much into full awareness, to contemplate it, recollect it, tune it up, tune ourselves to it. It's a sense of purpose, a sense of dignity, a wish to be authentic. It can push us to own up to and see our appetites and moods for what they are – 'Yes I want to get my own way. I'd like everyone to like me, I need reassurance. And I also want to grow out of this.' Seeing the range of self helps to dislodge some of the self-importance and the tendency to take one of our attributes as the 'real me.' And so it's through fully acknowledging and feeling the fantasy of self, with mindful clarity rather than judgement, that we bring that towards Awakening.

It takes time. Kisagotami went to the Buddha because of a wish to inquire. Inquiry can sound like an intellectual term but, really, it means the wish to find out, directly, for yourself. Things don't have to be good; we don't have to know the answer; we don't have to get it right. Rather, we are willing to fumble around a bit as we explore with the inclination, not to get buried in the dream, but to wake up. In the case of Kisagotami, at every doorway she received a negative response. 'No. We can't help you.' At some point she could have said, 'Oh, this is a waste of time.' But she didn't fully know the obvious truth yet. It's the same in our own case; the realisation is only partial at first and not fully accepted. That 'I am' sense doesn't really want to give up searching to revive its dead fantasy.

The searching also only ends with truth. So we have to keep working and thinking we've got it but still feel not quite resolved. Something, some potential for Awakening is only satisfied with the real thing. To acknowledge that potential evokes the vital quality of faith. We need to have faith in our own Awakening. Faith is the first sign of the dawn of spirit, and as such it brings the authority of the spirit with it. Without it, nothing else is possible. Faith is the ability to be in the unknown, the ability to live with not having an answer. This in itself takes away the ground from the need for permanence, the need for security. Surprisingly enough, this kind of surrender provides the greatest security of all. When you have faith in your potential for Awakening, then the insecurity of events and circumstances is not such a problem.

Sometimes mental or emotional patterns are very turbulent, they're foggy and you can't get any clarity around them. When that happens, feel the fog,

feel the turbulence with mindfulness and full awareness. Get to know that you can touch and be with that. Then gradually the ability to investigate what you've tended to ignore or repress also dawns. *Citta* gets broader and steadier.

One of the supportive factors for investigation (*dhamma-vicaya*) and mindfulness is 'appropriate (or deep) attention' – *yoniso-manisakara*. This is the quality of skilful attending. With the help of *yoniso-manisakara* we contemplate our experience and get a sense of it. We identify something that sums up the experience. It might be fogginess, hurt, whatever. Or we may find it problematic, but rather than attune to it, either get into the story of it or into remedies and strategies. But that tuning-in is a skill: to tune into the feeling tone, and the pulse of the problematic, the unresolved. Because of course if you could have fixed it, you already would have by now. So put that attitude aside and tune into the basic *citta* experience before it starts labelling and reacting. This basic sense is an energetic one. I liken it to electrical energy, magnetic energy. It's what gets excited and charged by experience. You might ask, 'What's the charge of something?' It's what pushes you away and draws you in. The *citta* is attuned to that particular quality.

When we are contemplating *citta*, the approach is careful. We feel our way to the stuck aspects with the steady aspects. We are aware: 'This feels tight, this feels sinking, this feels foggy, and this feel dangerous, this feels hopeless.' If we don't approach it with appropriate attention, the vortex in the middle pulls us right in again and we get overwhelmed and confused. Or we spin out. Then we have the feeling of being stuck all over again. If you don't know how to find your measure with being stuck, it can feel as though it is perpetuating itself.

Therefore mindfulness and full awareness are important. They offer a tangible sense of space around what is being experienced. If there is no space, we will most likely get drawn into something that is captivating and even obsessive. It pulls you in. The absence of space, the sense of compulsion, is a sign that there is attachment, and you get pulled in to thinking and reacting to what is affecting the *citta*. Kindness is also vital. So you just keep touching the stuck sense with a mind of spaciousness, clarity and empathy. You just aim to meet the problem or hurt at that place, to resonate with it. In terms of understanding what is really going on, the language of the *citta*, is resonance. Thinking just tangles things up, makes them busier. So we're not trying to have a remedy for the stuck sense;

we're just listening to it. Answers may not come right away. Right now, we just want to learn to meet what's happening. Perhaps we only meet one bit of it at a time. We meet the bit that we can meet.

Mindfulness of breathing offers a helpful resonance. Just feeling the rhythm of breathing – the suffusive, at-ease sense of breathing in and breathing out – is a very conducive experience. I attune to that rhythm – breathing in the disappointment and breathing it out, breathing in the uselessness and breathing it out, breathing in the powerlessness and breathing it out. It's all right to experience what we are experiencing. It's all right to be here; it's like rocking in a cradle, breathing through the *citta* and listening. Or bring up loving-kindness and hold the experience in that.

Sometimes people use faith as the sign for the steady aspect of *citta* – faith in a spiritual guide or just faith itself – and they listen to the suffering from that place of faith. This has its own magic or power to it. So there are many approaches. The idea is to find the one that you attune to, the one where you're *citta* tunes in and finds itself, wherein you have the feeling of 'Ah, I've landed.' If it's not that way, if you haven't landed, if you're desperately trying to find a system that works, then the sense of desperately trying to find is really the tune that's being played. That's a resonance you don't want, because you're going to meet difficulties. Trying to get it right, trying to meditate so that I can solve my problems...is going to make more problems. The result will be a sense of tightening up and going up into the head, which is where everything gets displaced into thinking and dreading, worrying and resenting – sometimes our self, sometimes others.

It's important not to have an answer because the real relief from this is in the space, the flow, the unknowing and the unknowable from which the Awakening urge arises. The *citta* is liberated into this space. The answers to the problems are secondary to the recognition that this problem, difficulty, or stuckness is really only this much. It's not self; it's not permanent; it's not an identity. It's just this. To some extent that's all we need. We don't actually have to have everything cleaned out. We have to recognize, 'Well, this is it.' It's as if you walk with a limp and you have the full recognition that the limp is just the limp. It's not me, it's just a feature; it's just a specific little scar that we wear. The essential thing is to be able to acknowledge and fully appreciate the quality of that which can work, that which can awaken, what that is, that fundamental *citta*, rather than this thing that we get stuck in.

Even in the presence of suffering, there can be the knowing of it. There's the handling of it; there's the space around it, the holding of it. And when the struggle fades, that space, that knowingness (which is not an intellectual thing) is still there. Things seem hopeless at times, but then life goes on; what is it in us that goes on? This is something to realise so that we don't get stuck on the tragedies of our lives. Then, when there's no big event happening, no great insights, waves of pleasure or important things to do, we're less itchy to find one. Instead we can acknowledge the sense of openness and spaciousness, and there is a sense of continuing awareness that is not motivated from 'I am.' There doesn't have to be a search for permanence, there isn't a searching for anything in particular, and there's something very grounding in that, very sane.

Take the time to explore that quality of nothing special, nothing going on. Find out what that feels like. When you experience it, you realise it's always been there. There's always been nothing going on. But we tend to follow the things that come in and draw our attention away from that sense of being present. Then we go looking for an event that we think we really need and really want, the thing that will make us all right. Have you ever found that? Have you found your mustard seed? Have you found the experience, the thing that you need? They've all come and gone, passed away. Look. And bury it, will you!